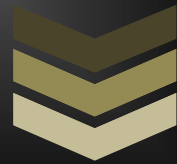
CREATIVE WRITING ~ AND THE CLASSICS?



- Where does Creative Writing come from?
- What does Creative Writing do?
- Where is Creative Writing headed?

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> **Creative:** specifically of literature and art, thus also of a writer or artist: inventive… imaginative; exhibiting imagination as well as intellect, and thus differentiated from the merely critical, 'academic', journalistic, professional, mechanical etc in literary or artistic production. So Creative Writing: also frequently in the United States as a course of study. *OED* (1972)

The last thirty years have seen the rise of Creative Writing and the decline of the study of Classics in universities. These things may not be unconnected. But whereas universities lament the decline of the latter, they are still uneasy about the rise of the former. Yet universities emerge from the same roots as Creative Writing: from the traditions of the ancient scribes and scribal schools of Babylonia, Egypt, Crete and the Biblical Lands, from the classical schools of rhetoric and teachers like Plato, Aristotle and Quintilianus, and from the work of the Irish monks who founded the great European monastic houses with their scriptoria, and from the work of the medieval scribes who made copies of valuable texts supplied by the Irish for the European centres of learning throughout the Dark Ages.

This article explores some aspects of this heritage. It is concerned with the teaching of Creative Writing in universities and addresses three basic questions: where does Creative Writing come from, what does Creative Writing do, and where is Creative Writing headed? The intention is to support and legitimise tutors by locating them in the history of their subject, to help develop an understanding of Creative Writing as a distinct subject by 'placing' it within the academy, and to minimise academic unease by showing Creative Writing not only as a subject producing (we hope) the literary 'classics' of tomorrow, but also as *the* original subject of university study.

Where does Creative Writing come from?

We don't know when humans first began to speak, but the evidence suggests that even *Homo Habilis* (Handy Man), who lived 2,500,000 years ago, probably had some ability to speak. Writing, on the other hand, is a very recent phenomenon. It is thought that narratives might be recorded in ancient cave paintings, on carved wood and stone and on the notched bones left to us by early humans. However, writing as we know it developed from a system of clay tokens used for accounting purposes somewhere in the courts and towns of Mesopotamia c8-6000BC. But these tokens descended from an even more ancient system for recording animal stocks and winter stores using tiny clay models.[1] The earliest known European written 'texts' are probably a plaque found at Gradesnica in Bulgaria, dated 5-3000BC, from about the same time, three pictographs on clay tablets from Turdas near Cluj in Romania and after them, carvings in Irish tombs dated around 3,000BC.

The idea for our alphabet seems to have come from the Middle East via the eastern Mediterranean. The Phoenicians, who had taken over and adapted writing systems developed in Egypt and the turquoise mines of the Sinai Peninsula, passed the idea of writing to the Greeks. The Greeks

[1] D. Schmandt-Bessarat, *Before Writing* vol 1 (Austin, 1992).

perhaps starting as early as the 9th century BC, found ways of adapting the Phoenician writing to a European language. This is an event recorded in sidelong fashion by mythology. According to legend, Zeus, disguised as a white bull, abducted Europa from the beach at Sidon. He swam with her on his back to Crete where he shape-shifted into the form of an eagle and ravished her in an olive grove. Her brother Cadmus, whose name means man of the east, searched for her: it was to the island of Rhodes that he went first. There he introduced the idea of the alphabet before moving on to mainland Greece to continue his search and to found the city of Thebes. The myth records the folk-memory that both settlers and the invention of writing came from the east.[2]

By the 6th century BC Greece was a place of burgeoning literacy. Around the middle of the 5th century BC Athens became a bourgeois democracy and almost at once it became clear that the established education system, which placed great emphasis on physical culture and music, did not match the demands of the new political world.

In 427BC the Sicilian orator Gorgias of Leontini arrived in Athens and began to teach rhetoric. In 393BC his ex-pupil, Isocrates opened a school near the gymnasium of Athens. Isocrates believed it was necessary to bridge the gulf between the art of rhetoric and the difficulties of reaching correct political decisions. For him, to be well spoken was part of the business of training the culture of the mind: rhetoric was part of the practice of politics and a form of culture, but was also the outward image of a 'good and faithful soul'. His aim was to study the art of discourse, *logos*, to train orators, to teach rhetoric for the political improvement of Greece and so that Greek orators might become 'the teachers of the world'.[3] For more than fifty years he continued his work and it was from Isocrates that the Greek liberal tradition in politics, literature and education grew. Following Isocrates, Aristotle, Plato, Zeno and Epicurus opened schools nearby and they too helped ensure that Greek political culture was that of the writer and scholar. It was in the Greek academies that Creative Writing, operating largely under the heading of Rhetoric, a subject connected with the creative use of language, something that can be taught, learned, studied and practiced, has its roots as a university subject.

Instead of confining themselves to lists of stores and property, as most early writers in Crete, Phoenicia and Mesopotamia had, the Greeks made the alphabet carry stories, poetry, songs. They also used it as a record of dialogue and developing thought. The result was an incredible outpouring of writing and the development of habits of mind that affect us even today. In Athens between the sixth and fourth century BC things moved with astonishing rapidity. Socrates, at the very start and heart of this literary revolution, managed to live his entire life of philosophical speculation without

[2] R. Graves, *The Greek Myths*, vol 1, (Harmondsworth, 1971), 194-98.

[3] E. B. Castle, *Ancient Education and Today*, (Harmondsworth, 1961); E. Barker, *Greek Political Theory* (London, 1967); T. A. Sinclair, *A History of Greek Political Thought,* (London 1967).

setting down a word in writing. However, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were written down; the historian Herodotus gave public readings from his works; Plato engaged in lively debates about whether Rhetoric, which had rapidly become the standard liberal education for statesmen, philosophers, generals and historians, was to be taught mainly as a spoken or as a written skill. Aristotle, who had been a student under Plato, wrote his influential *The Art of Rhetoric* and *The Art of Poetry*, two of the earliest discussions of the creative uses to which language could be put.

Both Plato and Aristotle were not entirely enthusiastic about the ways in which language could be manipulated. Plato was marked very deeply by the death of Socrates at the hands of the new democracy and consequently felt that all manipulators of words were to be mistrusted. He held a very dim view of writers. In *The Republic* he made his unease very clear. He saw writing as part of education, explicitly linked to citizenship. He regarded plays and poetry only in so far as they helped people to recognise qualities of 'discipline, courage generosity, greatness of mind' - and their opposites. For him most writers dealt in third hand experience and imitative forms, and as such they failed in their educational duties as citizens. Their work he said, had a lamentable effect on the public since it provided models not of good, strong, responsible men, but of bad, weak, frivolous men: theatre turned men into confused buffoons, poetry relaxed morals and appealed only to the low elements of the mind. Plato said that allowing poetry and theatre into a well run city-state was like 'giving power and political control to the worst elements in a state, and ruining the better elements'. He was prepared to ban writers of poetry and drama until they could prove their worth to Athenian society.[4] Most writers would prefer to see this as an indication of how seriously Plato regarded writing, rather than a blanket condemnation of their work.

The Ancient Egyptians had credited the jackal-headed god Thoth with the invention of writing. Thoth, often depicted with a pen and scrolls weighing dead souls against a feather, flanked by beasts waiting to rip offenders to shreds as they are dragged down to the underworld, was scribe to the other gods and the protector of all writers. Plato certainly knew of Thoth. In Plato's *Phaedrus* he describes a scene where, the king of Egypt agrees that most of Thoth's inventions are useful. But when Thoth tries to explain writing as an invention to aid memory and record wisdom, the king replies that Thoth is very much mistaken:

> Writing far from being an aid to memory, will simply produce forgetfulness. And rather than record wisdom will help people to find information without actually knowing anything. It will, says the king allow people to remain ignorant: 'You offer an elixir of reminding, not of memory; you offer the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom.....

[4] Plato, *The Republic* (Harmondsworth, 1968), 382.

Plato, Herodotus and Aristotle, all of them teachers, were mindful of this ambiguity, and well aware of the power of language in forming political plans, in entertaining the and manipulating the public and in defining identity through the language and stories shared by a community.

In 324BC the Athenian Aeschines founded a School of Rhetoric in Rhodes. It was said the School excelled at teaching clarity of expression, but was less certain on matters of content and thought. The school – particularly the rhetoric teacher Molon - was praised by Cicero, Pindar and Pliny. Several famous historical figures attended the school – indeed Cicero seems to have been a graduate of the school and the Romans used the school to train their politicians. Julius Caesar, Brutus, Cassius, Anthony, Cicero, Lucretius, Tiberius and Pompey all studied there. Tiberius returned to spend one of his periods of exile on Rhodes, bringing with him his entire retinue of catamites and concubines.

It is possible that the animosities so vividly recorded in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Antony & Cleopatra* had their inception at the Rhodes School of Rhetoric. Certainly one ex-pupil harboured no great affection for the place. A part of the story of Roman history that Shakespeare does not tell is that in 42BC, after the assassination of Caesar, Rhodes, rich and proud from the spice, resin, ivory, silver and amber trades, refused to join the plotters. Cassius, its former pupil, laid siege: the Romans stole 3,000 works of art, destroyed the 800 public statues that adorned the city, confiscated all public and private finance, butchered the citizenry, knocked down every house and building and then set fire to what remained. The few arts works that survive from this period, including the statue of the Marine Venus so praised by Lawrence Durrell, have generally been dredged out of the harbour – probably dropped by Roman looters hurrying back to their ships. After this no more is heard about the Rhodes School of Rhetoric. [5]

The growth of Roman military power transplanted Greek concerns and traditions to Rome, where the debates about the nature and teaching of writing and rhetoric were taken up again. Under the Emperor Vespasian, Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (also known as Quintilian: AD35-95) was the first Professor of Rhetoric in Rome. For more than twenty years he taught *progymnasmata* (exercises in argument, paraphrase, composition and oratory) to upper class boys, in preparation for their entry to the School of Rhetoric. At his retirement he wrote *Institutio Oratoria,* a memoir detailing his thoughts and teaching methods. In this treatise he wrote that his students were trained to paraphrase fables into a simple spoken narrative, to develop sententious sayings from the poets into speeches, to compose speeches and moral judgements and to apply these to different situations. He condemned

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[5] The work of the school did not disappear entirely though. Apollonius of Rhodes (295-215BC), an Athenian by birth but who was honoured by the city of Rhodes and who seems to have had a connection to the school, was the author of *Argonautica*. This work was later turned into a film entitled *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963). We could say the influence of the Rhodes School of Rhetoric can still be felt every time the film is repeated on TV.

'the regular custom' of flogging students, warned that effective study could not be compelled but depended on the good will of the student; he also warned that the depressed student would never display alertness of mind and he left instructions as to how to distinguish the merely clever imitator from the genuinely gifted orator. Quintilianus recommended that writers draft their work on wax tablets leaving plenty of space for corrections; he said the students should develop their memories and resort to ink and parchment only for final drafts or if their eyes were weak.[6] Quintilianus was clear that the success of the subject and the school had sprung from his preference for practitioners rather than professional academics – that is, writers who taught rather than teachers who wrote. He warned of the damage that would be caused by using inexperienced or inadequately prepared teachers, and of the subsequent decline that would be inflicted on standards of writing, speaking and public debate of all kinds.

Quintilianus prepared his students to progress to the Higher School of Rhetoric. There the students studied the art of public speaking: they learned how to debate and declaim, learned the arts of persuasion, gesture, composition and effective delivery. But tuition in Rhetoric was not welcomed by everyone in the classical world, nor was its importance to the health of society uppermost in everyone's mind. The satirical poet Aulus Persius Flacus recalled that as a child he was so desperate to avoid listening to other students endlessly practicing their oral composition as they paced back and forth, that he rubbed olive oil into his eyes and pleaded soreness to his mother to get the day off school.[7]

Training in rhetoric was as much concerned with the practice of writing and speaking as it was with the analysis of what had been written and said. The Greeks and the Romans saw language in its public and creative use as part of citizenship, something to be taught in a structured way. Literary discourse, persuasive public speaking and the pursuit of truth – in artistic matters, in speaking, in public policy - were all the province of higher education and the concern of the schools of Rhetoric. Only the development of a political dictatorship rendered the arts of Rhetoric irrelevant in Roman public life.

During the medieval period there was a revival of interest in the subject of rhetoric and several influential manuals on rhetoric and writing were produced. Rhetoric was re-established as part of the scholar's compulsory *trivium* - grammar, rhetoric and logic. Rhetoric, along classical lines, was a five part subject consisting of: Invention, Organisation, Style, Memory and Delivery. Geoffrey Chaucer (c1343-1400) was aware that by this time innovation in writing was seen to be something that happened within a convention of established and applied rules of composition, rather than in the creation of something entirely new. However, just as in ancient Greece, where there had been tension between the theoreticians and the practitioners, the

[6] Quintilianus, *Institutio Oratoria*, vols I-X, (Harvard, 1996).

[7] Hugh Martin, 'How Creative Writing invented English, or The Classical Provenance of Creative Writing', seminar paper, Sheffield Hallam University, Creative Writing Conference (Spring 2000).

teachers and the writers, so Chaucer mocked one of the most popular of the manuals on Rhetoric – the 12th century Geoffrey de Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova* - in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. It is clear that Chaucer saw literary invention and innovation in rather a different light from the academic teachers of the time.

In general, from the medieval revival of interest in Rhetoric, universities have trained scholars rather than creators, and university teachers have seen themselves as the custodians of ancient learning and approved traditions, rather than innovative creative practitioners. As Chaucer had been quick to point out, they could not impart to emerging writers much that was professionally or practically useful, since everything in theory was something they knew only at second hand rather than from their own literary practice. They were exactly the tutors that Quintilianus had warned against - non-writers teaching something through studying the texts of others. It was no accident that in the early Tudor period university educated writers often contented themselves with translating and 'Englishing' classical Latin plays, rather than creating new work. During the Renaissance, as more classical texts became available in translation and as university graduates and 'upstart crows' like Shakespeare (1564-1616) tried their hand at writing, there was great revival of interest in teaching and learning the ancient techniques of composition. Nevertheless, Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86), a soldier, courtier and experimental poet produced *A Defence of Poetry* in which he took contemporary writers to task for knowing little and caring less about the classical unities that, in his opinion, determined good writing and literary composition.

Shakespeare and Chaucer were the liveliest and most attuned minds of their times: both were relentless innovators, both were enormously well read. But neither was a scholar in the conventional sense: they were literary practitioners - and in Shakespeare's case it seems largely self-taught. And yet, while both of these men knew the rules of composition, both were highly aware of the limitations of the rules passed to them from the ancients by the scholars, and neither writer felt any great need for scrupulous observation. Indeed, they both broke and subverted literary convention through parody, experiment and innovation in order to find and create their own new and more responsive literary forms.

In Western Europe, the development of printing changed the emphasis of study, increasingly directing efforts towards what was written rather than what was said, towards what could be consumed in private rather than what was debated in public. In addition Literature and Scholarship had definitely parted company. By the 18th century both Oxford and Cambridge had given up on oral exams and had stopped testing oral and compositional skills altogether. Instead they set written papers testing their students' knowledge of a body of established information.

This situation was reversed to some degree in the United States. There Creative Writing has been a feature of academic life for over 130 years. Interpreted as 'the widest possible variety of creative work and creative discourse, for print, performance and broadcast, involving listeners, readers

and writers', it was an important component in the rapid expansion of the North American universities after 1945. The development of the subject was not achieved without some tension, however. Inevitably it clashed with English academic staff (historians, critics and theorists) many of whom felt that Creative Writing could never be a legitimate part of a University programme, and that it was definitely not a legitimate part of English Studies. Many felt that the only legitimate writing programme should consist of academic writing support, remedial literacy, study skills and academic essay writing. However, the sheer weight of student interest in the subject, and the fees to be derived from it, soon overcame these qualms.

The subject, as the universities soon realised, was a gift. A Creative Writing programme demands little in the way of technical support, equipment, research time or professional monitoring, and could, with little trouble, be made to bulk-out not only English courses, but a whole range of other subjects within the general area of the Arts/Humanities faculty. It could, without difficulty, be fitted into most Combined Studies and Joint Honours programmes. This allowed universities to process the less academically inclined students, helped maintain student numbers, allowed cross financing with worthy but less popular subjects and above all brought in student fees - lots of them. Creative Writing was seen as a university milk cow.

However, the universities and many of the intending students often misunderstood the nature of the subject and underestimated the demands of its discipline. In the early days it was often assumed that Creative Writing was 'undemanding': while students could usually get into a Creative Writing programme in large numbers because of open admissions policies, they often lacked the background reading that made further development likely. Many were unrealistic about their ambition to write, many lacked basic writing skills or a real interest in the subject and were simply looking for an easy way into university. Many simply wanted a passive lecture based programme, rather than the active development of their creative imaginations or their own writing and had no interest in writing after university.

By the 1960s the large numbers admitted to Writing programmes made matters worse. The increasingly casualised teaching community had little time for individual tutorial or development work, was already enmeshed in the flourishing black market in 'term papers' and increasingly concerned with the problem of plagiarism.[8] In these conditions Writing, which had been seen as a popular 'freshman course', 'an easy touch', just as quickly acquired a reputation as *the* major 'freshman flunk-out subject'.[9] Only in mid-1970s did North American universities begin to address these problems by acknowledging that the subject had expectations, standards and a rigour all of its own.

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[8] For a detailed discussion of the academic problems English was (and to a great extent is still) trying to solve through the development of Creative Writing programmes see: Louis Kampf, 'The Scandal of Literary Scholarship', T. Roszak (ed.), *The Dissenting Academy* (Harmondsworth, 1969), 45-60.
[9] L. Kampf & P. Lauter (eds.), *The Politics of Literature* (New York, 1968), 24.

British universities until very recently resisted the inclusion of Creative Writing as a legitimate undergraduate university subject. While English, Comparative Literature, Literary Studies, Literary Theory, Linguistics, Media Studies and Communications all developed rapidly within British universities, Creative Writing, the parent subject, made a tentative appearance only 30 years ago, and even then only at postgraduate level. While it proved to be popular and highly successful, the fuss about the inclusion of the subject at post-graduate level at East Anglia, and the vague feeling that somehow the subject is still not legitimate, has never quite gone away.

British Universities did not necessarily understand the subject or its requirements any better than US universities. If anything, they have at times seemed determined to repeat the US experience. Creative Writing in the UK is not only the high-recruiting milk cow, it is often the under resourced poor cow: desirable not for itself, but for the fact that it brings in student fees and demands (or gets) little in the way of resources.[10] However, since tutors in this subject write and publish, it has proved very useful when the RAE comes around again.

In spite of this ambiguous and hesitant start, Creative Writing has established a modest presence in undergraduate studies at several British universities: by 2006 it was offered as a degree component at sixteen British Universities, and as a stand-alone undergraduate degree at three others. The NAWE website lists a total of 421 Higher Education Creative Writing courses.[11] There are professors of Creative Writing at, among others, Sheffield, Bath, Glamorgan, London, East Anglia, Southampton, Nottingham Trent and even one at Derby. At most of the institutions where it is taught there seem to be 60-90 undergraduate students, a well established interest in Masters programmes and the start of PhDs in the subject. These are sure indications that the subject is popular, creating a distinct place for itself and developing its own presence and agenda of study.

What does Creative Writing do?

There are several current ideas about what Creative Writing at university might be. One popular view is that Creative Writing is Life Writing, a variety of Art Therapy, something that allows people to write out their experience, which encourages *catharsis* - purging. The most extreme form of this view sees writing as a form of care in the community. While most creative writing tutors acknowledge a clear therapeutic element in writing, this is not the main thrust of Creative Writing within universities. Indeed, tutors often try to persuade students to move beyond the safety of autobiography, however therapeutic, to put their revelations within fictional form, to think themselves into someone else's life and feelings, to take an imaginative leap out of their own skin and to develop a fictional cloak for their experience.

[10] The phrase 'milk cow – poor cow' as a description of Creative Writing was coined by Andrew Melrose.
[11] NAWE: www.nawe.co.uk.

Closely related to this is the approach that says Creative Writing is something anyone can do and which assumes that ‘we all have one novel in us’. Usually this is accompanied by the explanation that Creative Writing is ‘free expression’, that the student has only to emote on paper, to ‘write what they feel’, that no-one can judge it because it is ‘personal expression’, and that as such a student can never ‘get it wrong’. Tutors are often told by adherents of this view that Creative Writing has no structure, discipline or ‘work’ of its own, that there is no ‘content’ to it because it does not transmit a body of approved knowledge, and that there are no effective or legitimate criteria to evaluate written work. This view is ill informed, seriously mistaken and demeaning. These are not views that most tutors accommodate easily.

Perhaps the most important and the easiest to understand of the different views of Creative Writing is the one that sees it as part of English. Creative Writing tutors are often told that English ‘embraces’ Creative Writing. However, such a view is not only deeply unhistorical, it is simply wrong. Creative Writing is *the* original academy subject. English as a university subject, on the other hand, arose only in the 1860s.

The difference in aims and methodology of the two subjects is almost total. The most we can say is that both subjects are concerned with general cultural values, interpreting experience and with words: after that they part company. Most tutors in Creative Writing and lecturers in English are aware of the differences between the two subjects and for the most part they acknowledge and respect the skills and talents each requires. However, it is still important to distinguish between the *work* of English and the *work* of Creative Writing, if only because the view that seeks to establish that they are the same thing, that they are cognates, or that staff are interchangeable is calculated to cause aggravation for staff, grief for students and will undermine standards in both areas.

Firstly, it has proved troublesome to establish in the minds of some academics that Creative Writing is a valid university subject. It is also sometimes said that it is unlikely that students will ever produce writing to rival the masters of the past. Many academics still doubt that new writing can be marked and assessed ‘properly’, since their own academic work has not equipped them with adequately developed criteria for judging contemporary work. For many the literary and critical criteria that elevated the masters of the past have overwhelming significance, a historical and documentary depth that can be researched, a cultural resonance that can be tested and revisited, an accumulated meaning in interpretation and an industrial base of critical production which has been validated financially by funding bodies and by the RAE. All these things have a deadening effect on the relationship with Creative Writing, the written work of the present and on the possibility of artistic creation. Clearly also, these are defensive reactions, rather than legitimate objections to Creative Writing.

Secondly, it has been difficult to establish the legitimacy of Creative Writing as a separate entity from English. The power of the accepted canon, fixed notions of what ‘English’ is, the established research and teaching

interests of academic English staff and the notion that somehow Creative Writing is but a minor part of English all have a part to play in this. In many English departments, Creative Writing is often seen as marginal to the 'main stream' work of the subject. Because as far as managements are concerned English and Writing staff are seen as somehow interchangeable in the generalist aspects of their subjects, little attention has been paid to recruiting suitably experienced staff, establishing and developing teaching methods or developing adequate criteria for marking and assessment.

In addition workshop practice, which brings a very different set of learning outcomes and subject criteria, is also seen as something of a mystery by those to whom the established legitimate practices are those of the lecture, the seminar and the tutorial. And the failure to address these problems - problems that traditional academics and managements are not necessarily equipped to solve - has helped maintain marginalising and trivialising attitudes to the subject.

That there are areas of misunderstanding is not so surprising, but the arrival of Creative Writing in British universities has provided a considerable challenge to traditional Literature teaching and has revitalised some areas of the subject. For example, Creative Writing is increasingly seen as an effective way of teaching literary criticism, in that the issues a writer explores in producing a text are often very close to those a teacher or critic explores when analysing a literary text. Creative Writing has shown that a writer's self-discipline, their awareness of their craft, sense of purpose, conscious shaping and reshaping of material are key elements in the creation and consideration of any text. At the same time, however, Creative Writing demonstrates very clearly that these things, though close, still require a fundamental shift in the nature and focus of study and a very different set of professional skills and experience.

While Creative Writers are aware of texts other than their own, and particularly with the writing out of which their own work has grown, they are not particularly concerned with the interpretation and 'place' of texts already achieved. Creative Writing is concerned with the act of making, rather than the interpretation of what is already made. Creative Writing is concerned with finding effective forms, solving particular creative problems, the difficult business of bringing feelings, ideas, states of mind and ways of seeing things into the world.

The main difference to be established is that the work of English is forensic – it comes *after* the fact. English deals with works that have already been written and which have achieved some historical significance. Creative Writing, on the other hand, is concerned with making what the Italian poet Julius Caesar Scaliger (1484-1558) called 'imaginative interventions' in the present. Creative Writing is rooted in the planning and drafting of creative work, in the process of bringing new work into existence. It is preparation for publication or broadcasting, rather than the analysis of what has already been achieved. Creative Writing is concerned with what will be written, what is

being written, how a creative idea will be shaped and expressed, how it will get out into the world. Creative Writing is substantially *before* the fact.

There is clearly a great deal of common ground between the two subjects, yet the basic work, agenda and practices of an English team are very different from those of a Creative Writing team. To insert Creative Writing into an environment that is not primarily concerned with the acts, habits and preparations for writing creatively, which is not concerned with reflection on the practical processes of writing creatively, with developing 'writerly' habits and professional practices, is bound to be problematic. There are academics who write poetry, novels and scripts: there are writers who can teach academic subjects. But writers are practitioners of writing - they write creatively. They can pass on a body of practical knowledge about creative habits, creative practices and creative processes. And, equally importantly, they are engaged with interpreting the present moment and making 'imaginative interventions' in ways that few conventional academics are prepared for. If we can all acknowledge these substantial differences of working practice, in time these misunderstandings will fade away.

Where is Creative Writing headed?

It is important to remember that Creative Writing emerges from the same nexus of traditions that created the universities of Western Europe. The collapse of the Roman Empire meant that for several hundred years intellectual endeavour was supported by the scribal effort of Irish monks, who supplied manuscript copies to the scriptoria, Abbeys, private libraries and royalty of Europe. In time this tradition was supplemented by scribal traditions derived from the great centres of learning and the teaching methods discovered by the Crusading Knights and religious scholars in the Middle East (1095-1291).[12] Oxford and Cambridge owe their foundation (1249 & 1284 respectively), not only to the need for well trained civil servants for the growing centralised state, but to the history of scribing in Europe and the Middle East and the resilient learning of scholars whose main interests were channelled through religious centres of learning and whose main training methods were derived from scribal tradition and from classical manuals of rhetoric they preserved.[13]

Members of the UK Arts and Humanities Research Board have expressed worries that Creative Writing is somehow unravelling the academic standards and intellectual rigour of core subjects like English. On the other hand Graeme Harper, while Director of the Bangor University Centre for Creative and Performing Arts, made the point that the growth of Creative Writing is probably the greatest re-establishment of an ancient university subject that has ever been attempted. And it is a subject that it has re-established itself

[12] G. Makdisi, 'Scholasticism and Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (April-June 1989); H.Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2000).
[13] T. Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilisation* (First Anchor: London, 1995), 160-63; H. Waddell, *The Wandering Scholars* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1954), 32, 53, 55.

while leaving in place what was already there.[14] I think I would go further and say that Creative Writing is a reestablishment of the ancient traditions that established the universities in the first place.

Creative Writing clearly has a broad role to play within the university, not as an adjunct to English, nor as a service unit for Dyslexia; not as Arts Therapy, nor as Remedial Academic Support; not even as a part of Adult Literacy, but simply in its own right as a new kind of Classics.

Creative Writing is a subject which sets standards – and not only in terms of literacy, academic performance or even in terms of politics. Because, in practical terms, it can insist on standards in presentation, writing, spelling, organisation, planning, reading, engagement and expression, Creative Writing can do things, including combating plagiarism, that now give other 'core' academic subjects real difficulties.[15] Creative Writing clearly has its own historical and theoretical elements to refurbish: but in addition it attempts to affect awareness of feelings, the way people organise their thought and view their life. That is why the ancients saw it as central to citizenship. Clearly, rather than unravelling the traditional university subjects, Creative Writing is reasserting and fulfilling some part of the inner reflection on, and training for, citizenship that the ancients so valued band which is reflected in so many classical texts.

But there is another possibility too: that within the modern academy the subject has begun quietly, and by a completely different route, to reassert a standard-setting role that F.R.Leavis sought for English some forty years ago.

The International Writers' and Translators' Centre of Rhodes
12 April 2006

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[14] G. Harper, 'Why I', *Soapbox* (8 January 2002).

[15] Moy McCrory, 'Strategies for Checking Plagiarism in a Creative Writing Programme', Conference on Plagiarism, English Subject Centre, University of Liverpool (2 Nov 2001).