

THE UNIVERSITY OF DERBY CREATIVE WRITING ARCHIVE - INAUGURATION



A short talk inaugurating the Creative Writing archive at University of Derby, delivered to the 'Learning, Teaching and Research Conference', University of Derby, Buxton, 2 July 2007

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This paper serves to inaugurate what I hope will in time become a substantial archive of teaching materials and articles at Derby University on the subject of Creative Writing and the Classics – an archive mainly written by the teachers of the Creative Writing team.

This paper describes some of the ideas that lie behind my approach to Creative Writing as a university subject and which underlie my teaching. I am going touch on four areas:

- The Rise of Creative Writing
- Why the Classics?
- What use does Creative Writing make of the Classics?
- Writing as Citizenship

But I am only going to touch on these things. I hope that if people want more detail they will go to the archive.

The decline of the Classics at British Universities has been well documented. At about the same time the rise of Creative Writing has also become clear. Are these things connected and if so, in what ways? Perhaps the fact that one subject is taught mainly at the older universities and the other is taught mainly at the newer universities is significant. But within that shift there other connections to be made. Creative Writing is usually characterised as a newcomer to the academy, sometimes as an illegitimate and rather dodgy upstart. Some claim that it is not a ‘real’ university subject. I have even heard it said that the places where it is taught are not ‘real’ universities.

The Welsh poet John Tripp said that to find a writer in a university is like finding a cow in a dairy. It is a very apt metaphor because as a cow is to the dairy, so Creative Writing is to the university. Creative Writing is not the newest comer to the academy, but rather the oldest, the original, university subject. Without the scribal schools of the Egypt, Mesopotamia and Palestine, the Classical Schools of Rhetoric in Athens, Rhodes and Rome, without the ancient storytellers, historians, philosophers, dramatists and Creative Writers like Homer, Herodotus, Plato, Euripides, Virgil, Ovid, Euripides, Pliny and the rest - the people we now call ‘the Classics’ - there would be no English, Politics, Philosophy, History, Theatre, Sociology, American Studies, no Sciences, there would be no university.

Wikipedia defines the Classics as: ‘texts written in the ancient Mediterranean world’. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines the Classics as: ‘outstandingly important works of acknowledged excellence or value in Latin or Greek’. These are useful starting points, but ‘the Classics’ has a much wider range of meaning than either of these. The Classics, in addition to polished and sophisticated works in Latin and Greek, also refers to work from further afield, and it includes texts that began life as oral compositions. The Classics are the foundation texts of literary culture and modern civilisation, texts like: Sanskrit *Hymns of the Rigveda*, *The Bible*, the *Koran*, the Babylonian/Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Irish *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, the Welsh *Mabinogion* and the Anglo Saxon *Beowulf* are all classics.

I put these foundation texts to work as part of the module *Focus 1: Representation*. There I try to get students to step back from what they think of as the certainties of language, writing, literature, literary culture [established by 'A' levels] and to look at these things as if for the first time. I invite students to investigate the origins of language in humans, the invention, growth and development of the alphabet, the transition from an oral to a literary culture, to think about some of the things that can happen to stories when you write them down, what can happen to them when they are transmitted in hand-made copies, and to consider the differences in organisation between oral and literary 'texts'.

I think it is important that Creative Writing students consider the nature of language and the uses to which it is put. In the same way that a student of sculpture would consider the particular qualities of stone, metal or wood, or a student of fine art might compare the properties of poster, water, acrylic or oil paints, language is the material with which Creative Writers work. Our students need to develop an awareness of the history, nature and capabilities of language, words, the alphabet and writing. We look at the human experience that lies just behind the classics and we look at these things in a particular 'writerly' way. Among many other questions, I ask students to focus on the following:

- ◆ What is writing and where does it come from?
- ◆ What does writing do?
- ◆ What are we doing when we write?
- ◆ What do writers do when they write?
- ◆ What can we expect of writing?
- ◆ What can writers expect to achieve in their writing?
- ◆ What does writing do well and what does it do badly?
- ◆ What are some of the effects [positive and negative] of writing?
- ◆ How effectively does writing record language?
- ◆ In what ways is a world without writing different from a world with writing?

When dealing with the 'foundation texts' these fundamental questions are often much clearer than when asked in relation to contemporary writing. But by using the classics in this way and by asking these questions we can then also ask students to imagine 'the opposite' of our world – that is, a world without writing. I direct students to contemporary fiction where writers have imagined the world before writing was invented, or how it might be after civilization has been destroyed, when writing has fallen into disuse, or a world where the only literary activity is oral storytelling: novels like: Bruce Chatwin's *Songlines*; Stanislaw Lem's *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub*; Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*; Walter Miller Jr's *A Canticle for Liebowitz*; William Golding's *The Inheritors*; Russell Hoban's *Ridley Walker*; Jean Auel's *The Clan of the Cave Bear*; Frank Delaney's novel *Ireland*.

In asking students to address these very fundamental issues I am aware that I am inviting them to think about themselves, about their place in the world, about what they

do, and to ask what it is to be human, what is it that humans do and why reading, writing and speaking are unique, amazing deeply mysterious and worthy of further study.

For me Creative Writing – the creation of fiction, poems, scripts – is a multi-faceted subject: it is an introduction to a university discipline, an end in itself, a hobby, the extension of an ancient tradition, the perfection of individual expression and, also and perhaps confusingly, a part of the entertainment industry. Creative Writing, as with every other university subject, since it involves the organisation of thought and materials and an analytical approach to language and ideas, is also, as the historian Thomas Carlyle pointed out, ‘democratic voice’ in action, and as such it is also part of preparation for the responsibilities of citizenship, a transition to professional life and the ‘real’ world.¹

In emphasising this I am not making a new point but I am harking back to the classics. The great Classics scholar C.M.Bowra made it clear that the Greeks regarded writers as public teachers, ‘not in any pompous or arid sense but with a lively conviction that the highest lessons about men are best conveyed in a noble and satisfying form’:

For this reason Greek literature is always to some degree a public art [.....] Writers were keenly aware of their responsibilities [...] in speaking for themselves they addressed their words closely and candidly to their compatriots [...] they belonged to an attentive, appreciative, and critical society [.....] This enhanced their sense of public duty since they knew that with such an audience anything fake or feeble would soon be detected and derided. They could always draw support from the knowledge that they were at once the interpreters and the instructors of a national consciousness [...] and this provided a basic culture which intellectual leaders could take for granted and through it have some assurance that, if they had something serious to say, it would be taken seriously by a circle far wider than that of their intimate friends.²

For many classics scholars the study and practice of Rhetoric was what was once termed ‘a liberal education’.³ Accordingly, this passage raises a number of difficult

¹ Literature is our Parliament too. Printing, which comes necessarily out of Writing, I say often, is equivalent to Democracy: invent Writing, Democracy is inevitable. Writing brings Printing; brings universal everyday extempore Printing, as we see at present. Whoever can speak, speaking now to the whole nation, becomes a power, a branch of government, with inalienable weight in law-making, in all acts of authority. It matters not what rank he has, what revenues or garnitures: the requisite thing is, that he have a tongue which others will listen to; this and nothing more is requisite. The nation is governed by all that has tongue in the nation: Democracy is virtually there. Add only that whatsoever exists will have itself by and by organised; working secretly under bandages, obscurations, obstructions, it will never rest till it get to work free, unencumbered, visible to all. Democracy virtually extant will insist on becoming palpably extant. T. Carlyle, ‘The Hero as Man of Letters’ [1841], *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* [California, 1993], 141-2.

² C. M. Bowra, *Landmarks in Greek Literature*, [Harmondsworth, 1968], 31-2.

³ T. R. Glover, *The Ancient World* [Harmondsworth, 1953], 152.

issues which I ask students to take up in their third year. There, on a module which examines the nature of a writer's responsibilities, I encourage them to consider their role as writers, to attempt a definition of their responsibilities as writers, to consider who their audience might be and what it might expect of them. And these issues have become more, rather than less important. Unlike the writers of the ancient world who for the most part inhabited tiny city-states where the alphabet was the latest techno-kit, our student writers graduate into a contradictory, multi-voiced, multi-cultural, multi-media, high-tech world where, with the advent of the new technologies, the possibilities and the limits of creative participation are as yet uncharted and where articulate and active citizenship, when it is not irrelevant or merely a convenient political buzz-word, is often seen as a threat.

I feel it is important to put our students in touch with the origins of Creative Writing since this helps develop an awareness of their historical 'line of descent', and helps provide them with the 'content' of their subject. For students and tutors of Creative Writing, it is a legitimating experience to grasp that we are part of a tradition, that we are linked to the ancient Scribal schools and Classical Schools of Rhetoric, the Holy men of ancient India, Palestine and Arabia, the poets and storytellers of Africa and Australia, to the Anglo Saxon *scop* and the Celtic bard. To feel connected in this way to the mental habits, professional responsibilities and the creative practices of the people who helped found civilisation and who provided the texts that make universities possible, is a heady business. In using the Classics in this way, I am also aware that we may be producing materials that will one day be studied as part of the English Literature syllabus, perhaps even the Classics of the future.

I am also aware that in our own way we are helping to shape a generation of thinkers, writers and social leaders whose behaviour, decisions and sense of themselves will be crucial to the future of humanity and to life on this planet.

As I said at the start, I hope this paper will serve to introduce a growing archive of teaching materials and articles on the subject of Creative Writing and the Classics. In particular I hope that Dr Simon Heywood will share some of his materials on oral storytelling and Homer and that Dr Moy McCrory will write up some of her teaching materials on the use she makes of Ovid. The materials will be housed in Creative writing and I hope that colleagues [of all disciplines] will add to the archive in the future.