



Let the writing be of words

from writing stories to writing materials

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ABSTRACT

Across the Anglophone world (and elsewhere), creative writing courses are proliferating. A remarkably high number of tertiary education institutions now offer to train students at undergraduate, graduate coursework and postgraduate research levels. While few such courses enjoy the huge numbers who enrol in, say, the business or communication faculties, there is a steady and growing number of people who believe they have a story to tell in prose, poetry or script, and who want to be trained in the techniques and in the field. Not many of our graduates go on to work as professional published writers; and not all of our graduates are sophisticated users of narrative; or even of language. Writing is not alone in this; all disciplines produce graduates with uneven skills and capacities. But I suspect that in the case of writing, we tend to confuse means and ends – to focus on the book *inside* the person, and not on the material that is used to make it. By “material” I mean ideas and the interest in narrative, and also language – vocabulary, syntax, punctuation, organisation – and ideas. In this paper I discuss ways of engaging with these two different, but related, aspects that should be part of the attributes possessed by our graduates at all level.

Let the snake wait under
his weed
and the writing
be of words, slow and quick, sharp
to strike, quiet to wait,
sleepless.
(from William Carlos Williams, "A sort of a song")

Over two decades ago, Brian Eno threw out a challenge to the creative sector, stating:

The arts routinely produce some of the loosest thinking and worst writing known to history ... The lack of a clear connection between all that creative activity and the intellectual life of the society leaves the whole project poorly understood, poorly supported and poorly exploited. (Eno 1996: 258-59)

This was part of the (perhaps a little hyperbolic) speech he gave on the occasion of the 1995 Turner Prize award ceremony (the prize won that year by Damien Hirst), so it was directed at writers in the visual rather than literary arts. Nonetheless, Eno's complaint is relevant across the sector, and I use it as a springboard into this discussion of what I identify as something of a problem in how we teach creative writers. This discussion may seem unabashedly polemic; however, it is offered not in the spirit of debate, but rather as part of the ongoing discussion in the academic creative writing community about how we might offer our students (and ourselves) both the avenues, and the capacity, to further "the intellectual life of the society".

This is an important issue, because of the remarkable proliferation of writing courses and hence of writing graduates in Australia, the UK and elsewhere (excepting the USA) since the 1980s. A very high proportion of tertiary education institutions now train students at undergraduate, graduate (coursework) and postgraduate (research) levels. While few of these institutions enjoy the huge enrolments in creative writing awards that may be found in, say, the business or communication faculties, there is a steady and growing number of people who know they have a story to tell, and who want to be trained in the techniques and in the field of literary production.

While this is pleasing – because people really believe there is value in narrative, understand its

affordances, and are confident that they themselves can participate in its practice – I would assert that writing is more than story, and that the teaching of writing should incorporate a broader focus. After all, for thousands of years humans have managed to tell good stories despite the lack of tertiary courses designed to train storytellers. So, while I welcome both our students and their narrative impulses, I remain unconvinced that conveying a good grasp of narrative structure should be our primary aim. People will, after all, write stories; some people – whether formally trained or autodidacts – will go on to produce impressive bodies of work. One would hope our graduates will be well to the front of that phalanx – I'm certainly not opposed to literary success – but my concern is with how best to deliver people who possess important knowledge, technical aptitudes, ethical thinking and the other facilities so necessary to produce literature that contributes richly to the creative field and to society more broadly.

The graduate attributes listed in most tertiary institutions' policies on the generic skills their students will possess – policies that are remarkably similar across institutions – include the capacity to think creatively; have an enquiring mind; possess a body of knowledge appropriate to their field; possess technical facility and professional understandings; and have a commitment to ethical practice. These should be part of the toolkit all graduates take into their professional futures, regardless of the course they studied. Teaching academics are expected to use these aspirational lists to structure our classes; and we do, of course. However, given the exigencies of the curriculum, attention typically focuses on specific discipline areas, and the skills peculiar to it; sometimes at the expense of the more generic skills. As a consequence, in creative writing courses at most universities I know, considerable energy is committed to transferring knowledge about the mechanics of story. We teach students to read closely and intelligently; we convey the elements of narrative – plot, character, dialogue, setting, voice, perspective and all – and coach them through modes of practice,

genres and forms. By the end of their studies, most of our students have a respectable grasp of narrative and can produce a respectably crafted work. They understand the uncertain imperatives of story arc, characterisation, setting; they can illuminate a moment of insight or event, can tap into an emotional state, can reflect an image in words. This is commendable. Granted, few of our graduates become prizewinning authors, or pursue writing careers (though, marvellously, some do). But this is not an outcome writing programs bear alone: especially in the creative field, where job opportunities are limited and financial rewards low, few people can make a living from their practice, and anecdotal evidence suggests that though a small proportion of graduates are still working at their practice five years or more after completing their studies, they are well informed about the world of literary arts, are excellent readers, and capable of creative thought and expression.

What concerns me here is not the ability our graduates do or do not possess to craft a story or make a living from their writing practice. Rather, my concern is that, in at least some cases, they do not have much to work with beyond their ideas. In the past couple of decades, during which time I have taught hundreds of students, examined some sixty postgraduate dissertations (many of them doctorates in creative writing), and worked as a book and journal editor in both theoretical and creative fields, I have seen a great quantity of the product of our graduates. While there is rarely any doubt about the energy of their ideas, the urgency of the problems they are tackling, or overall the depth of their thinking, it is rare that I have been able to identify a real sense of language, a real tact where words are concerned, a real appreciation of the effects of choice of word or word order, or even any real understanding of basic grammar and syntax. Indeed, like Brian Eno I have been known to complain that I have seen “some of the ... worst writing” – and this from people trained in the art.

So, what isn't working? My suspicion is that our students are not adequately taught a genuine respect for the materials in creative work. “Making,” wrote Cameron Tonkinwise (2008), “involves working with materials. It involves a knowing about materials ... [and] what materials can be made to become.” Our graduates need this sort of knowledge. For writers, “materials” includes, of course, the structures of narrative, image and argument; but also, and importantly, words, punctuation, grammar and

syntax. Students in performing arts, where the body is a key material, and in visual arts, where practitioners must handle chemicals, sharp objects, electrical and mechanical equipment, are routinely trained to know their materials intimately, and instructed about the importance of handling those materials judiciously, treating them with deep respect and even caution. Writing students and graduates do not consistently show a similar understanding of the power, and the potential risks, of the materials we use: words, phrases, sentences. Yet without such understanding, and concern, and even passion for those materials, their future writing is likely to be limited.

Annie Dillard tells an anecdote that resonates with me and with many writers and writing-academics I know:

A well-known writer was collared by a university student who asked, “Do you think I could be a writer?”

“Well,” the writer said, “I don't know – do you like sentences?” (Dillard 1989: 70)

Do you like sentences? Is it possible to “be a writer” without having a real taste for sentences? While I have seen much passion for narrative among writing students, I have seen little comparable passion for sentences, although sentences are key building blocks of story. Without sentences, it is not possible to craft a story, a poem, an essay, a script. (Okay, maybe a poem doesn't need sentences; but the lines of a poem still respond to the logic of the sentence, if only by dismissing it.) I suspect that what is needed – among the growing list of things we need to teach more effectively and efficiently – is the capacity to engender in students both a passion and a respect for materials; and with that, skill in the particularities, idiosyncrasies and potential of the “stuff” of writing. All our efforts to teach the first aspect – the construction of a story or essay – will get students only part of the way to becoming writers in the fullness of their craft.

Let me explain this assertion by way of anecdote: I enjoy reading (“reading”) poetry in languages not my own. I have spent hours prowling through, say, Neruda in Spanish, or Mayakovsky in Russian, or Ovid in Latin, in the same sort of spirit that students are, very often, persuaded to write a story or a poem: that is, to do it without much *a priori* knowledge. My reading captivates me, but it has not provided

me with fluency in Spanish, Russian or Latin, any more than the considerable effort students put into their writing necessarily generates in them the foundational skills for writing. Yes, they need to immerse themselves in their practice; but just as a lifetime of poetic immersion without a knowledge of the language will never provide me real facility with Spanish or Russian or Latin, so too the students, thrown in the deep end as they are, are unlikely to get the return on their investment they might expect.

Of course, we need to train our students to write, and encourage them to write often, and spontaneously; of course, we need to direct them to the works of others, and give them the analytical tools needed to engage; but this alone will not necessarily make them writers. For that, they need to possess both the materials of writing, and the skills to use those materials. They need, for example, to know the difference between a contraction and a possessive; to understand how a pronoun refers back to a referent, or the ways a participle can operate; they need to know the difference between comma, semi-colon and colon; and so on. These are not exciting topics, but they are the mechanics of effective *and* of experimental communication.

No one possesses these knowledges intuitively; though humans are born hardwired for grammar, most of us develop little more than what is necessary for instrumental communication. Writers need more than the basics; they need to know their materials at a very deep level; to internalise the shape and taste of words, the music that punctuation causes, the breath and beat of a shapely phrase. Ideally, they will be able to operate in language the way a fish operates in water: according to what Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) has termed a “feel for the game”, a practical sense (*le sens pratique*), a tacit knowledge that comes from being so fully immersed in it that it doesn’t need to be consciously attended to. This, in any field of endeavour, comes about only through learning and rehearsing skills until the knowledge is fully incorporated. Students (indeed, any writers) who achieve this level of material knowledge will not necessarily write sentences marked by extreme grammatical accuracy, but they will write elegantly, flexibly, innovatively; and they will be able to make the choices that will result in a new way of thinking-in-writing, new approaches to storying and poetry. This is not necessarily “academic” fiction, or avant garde writing, but it is writing that generates in their readers something to think with; a fresh way

of perceiving the world; a counter to the deadening effects of, say, the daily news.

Here I look to William Carlos Williams who in his 1944 poem, “A sort of a song” (the first lines of which form the epigraph for this paper) announced that there are “no ideas / but in things”. It is the thingliness of ideas as well as objects, the materiality of thought and writing and what is used to build them, that is at stake here. This is, perhaps, at odds with characterisation made of language by many academics: as a field, an ephemeral “space” for communication and production, rather than as material objects (Williams’ “things”). Writers too often associate the term “material” not with language as an ontological form, but rather with the raw ingredients for a story (plot lines, characters, an event). However, drawing on a Heideggerian sense of practice, it is possible to see language as having physical properties that writers can exploit as part of the materiality of our practice, and to render our work more alive, richer, more committed to “ideas / in things”.

Techne, or the craft of shaping, and poesis, or making, are words Heidegger expounded at length in various of his works. Poesis is generally distinguished as the “art” term, and techne as the more humble “expertise” term. Tom Stoppard’s 1972 radio play, *Artist Descending a Staircase*, makes this explicit in the scene where Donner, one of the three avant-garde artists who are the play’s (pompous, quarrelsome, opinionated) characters, announces that:

Skill without imagination is craftsmanship and gives us many useful objects such as wickerwork picnic baskets. Imagination without skill gives us modern art. (Stoppard 1973: 21)

This bifurcated logic – skill, or techne; imagination, or poesis – is an excellent illustration of the commonsense understandings, and the false contradiction in which they result. Heidegger puts the terms to work in a non-binary manner: looking back to their use in the ancient texts, he identifies poesis and techne as terms that possess very similar qualities. Poesis is more than “imagination” (with or without skill), because it incorporates the idea of “being responsible”, of “starting something on its way to arrival” (1977: 292). Techne is more than craft skill: while Heidegger does locate it in the space of

“making,” he also identifies in *techne* a “bringing forth” that is, like *poeisis*, a mode of knowing (Heidegger 1997: 121). In Heidegger’s terms then, one might say that writers definitely need technical skills (*techne*) in order to bring forth works (*poeisis*); but we also need to develop literacy with respect to creative writing-oriented *techne* and *poeisis* in a manner that contributes to the acquisition of graduate attributes: creativity, knowledge, technical capacity, professional understanding et al. Together, and applied to creative writing, *techne* and *poeisis* connote skill in the use of materials, along with skill in thinking and imagination, and an understanding of language as the (*no ideas but in things*) “stuff” of thought.

From this perspective, I’d suggest, writers need to be capable of producing more than a good workable manuscript; their work should aim to “bring forth” something not really visible before, and to achieve a kind of knowing. To reprise and correct Stoppard’s Donner, our students should, ideally, possess the sorts of skills that will allow them to make wickerwork baskets that are works of modern art: baskets that contain thought, made by means of art that depends on skill. Such work will be able to call attention to itself and to the space for living it “brings forth”; it will be able to persuade and convince; it will be the work of a writer who is committed to “imposing oneself upon other people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind*” (Didion 1976: 224), and thus engage with, and not simply entertain, its readers.

How might we design courses that will train students in an approach to practice that is as much intellectual as it is creative? One current approach, which I find compelling, is to focus on the skills of “material thinking”. This concept, grounded to some extent on Heideggerian notions, was been given a new platform by its development in the opening chapter of Paul Carter’s *Material Thinking* (2004), and its further explication in a number of other publications, including a special issue of the journal *Axon: Creative Explorations* (2018, 8.1). Other contributors to this area of thought include Johanna Drucker (2008), Jerome McGann (1993), Caren Florance (2018), Glyn Maxwell (2012), Kristen Kreider (2015), and many others. Though a number of relevant publications on the topic emerge from creative practice as research, or materiality in practice, and though many are written by people whose first line of affiliation is to the plastic, visual or performing arts, a number

are first of all writers; and after all, writing too is a material practice. It engages the whole self in the act of making: not only the kinetic and chemical activity involved in the crafting of the work on paper or screen, but also the phenomenological activity of being in a particular time and place, writing from that context, and within that context making a virtual-dimensional world. Heidegger insisted that “Poetic creation, which lets us dwell, is a kind of building” (Heidegger 1971: 213): and writing is, thus, a material practice, and one that exploits the materiality of language, thought and idea to make a kind of building, a space in which to dwell. This is a mode of knowing, a connection, as Eno has it, between creative activity and the intellectual life of a society, and done well, it should be an absorbing work; a material work, that matters.

An example of such practice can be seen in a work of writing produced not by a writer, but by philosopher/composer John Cage. His “Lecture on Nothing” (1950) [1]– as much a musical performance as a linguistic text – begins with the statement “I am here, and there is nothing to say”. He continues for some time to utter that “nothing”, to respond to the silence of the space by making words that occupy it, that fit it. Out of this language with/in/as silence comes what is one of his more famous expressions: *I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry* (Cage 1961: 109).[2] The phrase has been appropriated by seemingly dozens of bloggers (as I discovered when googling it): people who seem to have missed his point. I’d suggest that having nothing to say, and saying it, does not mean filling spaces with words that are produced without much thought or craft or impulse other than that of exposing one’s private thoughts. It means, I’d suggest, taking that space for “nothing to say”, and producing a “nothing” that, in the pacing of the delivery, in the juxtaposition of word against word, and in the refusal to obey the conventions of the lecture, is both a material product, and a product that matters. It is a reminder that less can be more; it is a reminder that traditions are there to be examined, not obeyed; and it is a reminder that the most common situation or story or practice can become a machine for thinking.

Finally, then, what I propose is that we shift our attention, as teachers and as writers, from the finished product to the process. Focus on material; focus on ideas. We can acknowledge, with Auden (1940: 247), that “poetry makes nothing happen”. But (*pace* Auden), this doesn’t mean the work does

not matter, or that it does not have material effects. Creative practitioners trained at a tertiary level and functioning as creative intellectuals should be able to connect creative activity with intellectual life, and by working with the material of our form, be it commas or verbs or ideas, draw attention to things that matter.

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Notes

1. Cage's 'lecture' is downloadable as an MP3 recording, from http://mediamogul.seas.upenn.edu/pennsound/groups/Millennium/Millennium_06_John-Cage_Rothenberg_Lecture-on-Nothing_UPenn_9-28-98.mp3; it is worth listening to the cadences of his presentation.
2. See too Edwin Morgan's 'Opening the cage: 14 Variations on 14 Words' (1968), in which he takes the 14 words of the phrase and turns them into a fourteen-line poem.

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