

The Myth of Isolation: Its Effect on Literary Culture and Creative Writing as a Discipline.

Alex Pheby

University of Sunderland, UK

Abstract:

The myth of the writer's isolation undermines the project of teaching Creative Writing, particularly at PhD level, yet it is an idea that is actively fostered by the structures and often the staff of the institutions that offer creative writing degrees. By abnegating their pedagogic responsibilities, many universities are enforcing a de facto domination of commercial influence, ignoring the wider social functions of Creative Writing practice, and failing to contribute to a literary culture. At a time in which creativity is increasingly focussed on the marketing and sale of 'product,' this undermines literary experiment and the non-commercial possibilities for writing. Universities must undermine the pernicious myth of isolation, alter the pedagogical structures which unwittingly foster it, contribute to process centred understandings of Creative Writing, and offer alternative routes to literary recognition and publication.

There is a myth that has been very difficult to shake: that Creative Writing is done by a writer in isolation. It is a myth that some writers and academics have had a hand in perpetuating, and it is one that has consequences for those teaching and studying Creative Writing and for the state of literary culture in general. The consequences, broadly, are that university staff are stopping short of developing their teaching and research practice and are failing to provide an alternative to the prevalent commercial domination of literary practice.

In an article published in issue 41 of the NAWA journal. Andrew Cowan, senior lecturer in Creative Writing at UEA, asks whether postgraduate study in Creative Writing is justified academically or creatively: "do you sometimes suspect that those who remain [in education] tend to be the most institutionalised, the most dependent on feedback, group situations, structures and support, and perhaps, the least committed to succeeding or failing as writers, opting instead for the security of supervision over the insecurity of writing's necessary isolation...?"ⁱ

While rhetorically the article waivers between confession and polemic, his concerns are reflective of an endemic anxiety within academia as to the legitimacy of the project of Creative Writing teaching - an anxiety that has been present since the inception of academic Creative Writing,ⁱⁱ present in Malcolm Bradbury's many pronouncements on the impossibility of teaching students how to write and which is often re-iterated as an introduction to incoming students hoping and expecting that precisely the opposite is the case. Whether one chooses to accept that the techniques of writing practice are arcane and mystical to the point of incommunicability, or to take the opposite, but equally unattractive view, that writing

is purely mechanistic, it is clear that the notion of 'isolation' is very much central to our anxiety. There is a clear suspicion of Creative Writing teaching from within those who are charged with teaching it, and it centres on this idea that teaching disrupts a writer's 'necessary isolation.' Before I go on to address why this suspicion is unnecessary and, more importantly, acts as a limit to the possibilities for writing and literary practice in a cultural and commercial climate which is already narrowing the field of possible writing, it is first necessary to debunk the idea of necessary isolation.

It would be easy to undermine the practical possibility of isolation as it relates to the process of writing at a theoretical level. To side with the Structuralists, language *per se* is a communal activity and a writer engaging with it is always already engaged in a system of signification and influence. Post-structuralist approaches have mercilessly dismantled the assumptions that underpinned the idea of discrete, transcendently distinct subject positions of which 'the author' is a stubborn remnant. New Historicists and cultural constructivists would place the writer within contexts so varied and influential that the idea of isolation would be ridiculous. Even straight analytic philosophy would have something to say about the solipsism inherent in the valorisation of isolation.

It would also be easy to demonstrate the very limited understanding of writing practice that the notion of isolation supports. One could argue that the construction of the author as an isolated producer of texts is only sensible if one takes a very limited, object centred, view of writing practice. The understanding of writing as process, as communication, and as therapy, cannot be supported by the concept of the isolated writer. Positioning writing in traditions of communal development of narrative, of performance (particularly in poetry), of oral and folk cultures, of culture in general, also becomes impossible. The only sustainable position isolation supports is for writing as teleologically bound to the production of discrete and unique texts for consumption by isolated readers.

However, no such recourses to literary and cultural theory are necessary for one obvious reason – the model isolated writer, in very concrete and practical ways, is never isolated in the first place.

Firstly, and perhaps most appropriately, the writer is not and has never been isolated from other writers. It would be difficult to overestimate, for example, the influence of Beckett's apprenticeship to Joyce on his work, or to imagine the Bloomsbury group working in isolation, or that any of the other canonical literary circles weren't sources of inspiration for their writers. Indeed, it is easier to argue that writers come together precisely so that they

might influence each other and so develop their practice. In the article cited, for example, Cowan mentions “the other writers he knows”ⁱⁱⁱ and it is, perhaps, illuminating to know that his wife is also a novelist. Even if the relationship the isolated writer has with other writers is not as immediate as marriage, it is rare to find a writer who has no significant contact with other practitioners. Indeed, it seems that writers have always surrounded themselves with other writers (and, for that matter, readers), shared their work and operated as support for each other. If this is isolation it is isolation of a very unusual type – a type with more than a passing resemblance to the kind of community of writers one might find in an academic department, or in independent writing groups.

For the sake of argument, let’s say this tendency of writers to seek each other out was not the case, and that they maintained a hermetic self-reliance. The moment their work is submitted for commercial consideration other influences become unavoidable. In modern publishing the first influence on the author is the agent. Where it might once have been an agent’s role simply to represent the author to the publisher, freeing them from the onerous task of eating expensive lunches, now their role is much more hands on. As my own agent David Smith puts it in his contribution to Edinburgh University’s Handbook of Creative Writing: “The chances are your novel is not quite ready for submission to publishers. You may think you have perfected it but it’s quite likely that your agent will suggest revisions. These are not so much aesthetic considerations as responses based on her experience of whatever consensus or prejudice is at large within publishing. Remember that your agent is talking to editors all the time – finding out what they’re buying, what they’re not buying, what they love and what they hate – and this enables her to build a fairly reliable picture of how any new novel might be received. So if your agent advises you to simplify a split narrative into a single voice, it’s probably because split narratives rarely find favour with publishers.”^{iv} An agent is, at least in my agent’s opinion, in a position to dictate writing practice, and not, importantly, on aesthetic grounds.

Where the increasingly crowded isolated writer was once only influenced by their muse and then perhaps by the other writers surrounding them, as soon as the commercial world is approached – as a writer must always do if they are to meet Cowan’s characterisation of the successful isolated writer – there is unavoidable influence, not only from the agent. If and when the manuscript reaches a major publishing house, another layer is added: judgement is passed by an editor, and then another layer: that of the marketing team, and another: that of the senior editor who controls the funding of any publication. They all have something to say about how the manuscript is written. And if the role of the editor is not always as interventionist as it was when Raymond Carver’s editor Gordon Lish completely rewrote the

ending to his story "One More Thing",^v if a book is to get published it must meet the requirements its publishers have of it and, in a market which must commodify its writing, the push towards commercial viability is unlikely to revolve around such esoteric concerns as literary worth.

So we can see that even if the writer wants isolation, there is certainly no getting it. Rather, there is an overabundance of influence, most noticeably from the commercial world. What, then, is at stake when the mythic existence of a writer's isolation is peddled? What effect does the elision of external, particularly commercial, influence have?

There seem to be two related answers.

Firstly, the myth of isolation naturalises and universalises the object centred model of writing practice on which it is founded, relegating those practitioners who work within openly avowed networks of influence, those who do not focus on the product of writing, but on its practice, and those who have not published or cannot publish their work, to 'non-writer' status.

And secondly it masks the process by which those given 'writer' status are eventually presented to their readership, hiding ubiquitous commercial influence behind a fiction of independence.

These two moves may be a necessary function of the market for writing. A book is rarely bought *after* it is read and thereby by virtue of its writing. It is bought on a promise - that it will fulfil whatever expectations the buyer has of it. For this promise to be meaningful, it is essential that a system exists by which writing and writers can be differentiated, characterised and commodified. Historically, the notion of 'literature' and the author's name have been central to this system and, in order for these things to communicate in the market, the publisher must anxiously preserve their distinctiveness. It might be argued that the myth of isolation serves the function of vouchsafing the integrity of the named brand by asserting its unimpeachability and, additionally, protecting its value by delineating what can and cannot be considered literature.

If this is true, then there are clear problems for those involved in the teaching of Creative Writing. The myth of isolation misrepresents the processes our students wish to be taught, it limits the possibilities of their practice - and of the practice of all writers - to that which can be successfully marketed, and it disguises the influence of a system which is dedicated to

preserving and marketing the voices of established authors against the confusing intrusion of marginalised forms of writing and even new writers.

What is the alternative to the idea of isolation? Should it be admitted that the writer, rather than being a discrete and unalterable producer of their own brand, is instead as open to influence as any other human being? Should we attempt to see writing practice as something that takes place within a history and culture of narrative and performance and is not solely contained in the relationship between the writer and their word processor? Should we be open to the possibilities of non-commercial forms of practice?

This would certainly seem to be what the teaching of Creative Writing presupposes at undergraduate and masters level. The practice of Creative Writing in these academic settings is precisely to influence the writer and to allow them to contextualise their work. At an undergraduate level it exists to provoke writing and in a small way to mould what is written. At masters level this provocation and moulding is used to develop voice and style and technique, to suggest appropriate areas of interest, to develop experimentation in practice and to provide group support through the seminar system. There is no supposition that it is necessary to be isolated – quite the opposite. The position is taken that informed feedback from a community of writers with whom an individual surrounds themselves is, if not absolutely essential, then at least very helpful. Neither is there any suggestion that writing practices should be limited exclusively to those with commercial viability.

Where the academic system begins to become unsure of itself is in the development of post-graduate and faculty research culture. At levels more advanced than masters - where, importantly, commercial concerns for the writer can become a factor - the doctoral and post-doctoral support a university offers its students and staff tends back towards isolation, drawing on the model of the non-creative research student who works alone under the supervision of one or two senior academics. At a faculty level, there is often a decision to employ commercially successful staff rather than those who engage with non-commercial practice and academic research. Rather than creating an alternative to the commercial influence that we have seen is inevitably placed on writers, there seems to be a tendency, post-masters, to enforce isolation (which is a *de facto* enforcement of commercial influence), to withdraw academic influence, and to substitute academic research publication for commercial publication, as if the two were the same thing.

There might have been a time - when the publishing industry had more invested in writing than it does currently - when this withdrawal was an acceptable manoeuvre, encouraging the

fostering of authors by sympathetic editors and publishers, but today, with an industry making editorial choices under the extreme pressure to sell in volume, it is a tacit admission of failure, an abnegation of responsibility, leaving the arbitration of value to a system which cannot afford to invest in the aesthetic or social qualities of writing and which must rely on the isolation myth to limit the literary field to those brand-names it knows it can make a profit from.

If Creative Writing academia and the writers that work within it are to have a role aside from acting as unpaid editorial adjuncts to a failing mass market industry, there must be a point at which those things that are particular to writing, but which cannot be taken up by commercial interests, are fostered, protected and become the focus of research culture. I would include in this list: radical forms of writing; marginalised voices; hybrids of critical and creative writing; new forms in prose; poetry; difficult and intellectual writing; social and community writing practice; process centred and therapeutic writing. Failure to do this would be to suggest that these areas were not worthy of attention and would seriously undermine the credibility of Creative Writing as a discipline.

There is, in any case, an argument that a healthy research culture in Creative Writing could arrest the slide towards illiteracy that threatens commercial writing. If we reclaim the right to act as arbiters of value in writing and demonstrate our commitment to the endangered notion of experimentation in writing practice, we can act as a contrary influence to the homogenising obligation to repetition that characterises the marketing of writing produced by the brand name model. I would argue that this movement is presaged in much of the MA teaching that takes place within universities, but that it is always compromised by the focus on commercial validation and the failure of departments to provide a viable alternative to commercial publication for material that is not suitable for the current market – the consequence being that there is no available alternative toward which even commercial writing can tend.

The characterisation of the writer who remains in higher education given by Cowan - as someone who requires a crutch and who cannot function externally - is only accurate if the institution within which they are institutionalised provides them nothing other than that crutch. If a university provides its students with nothing but the community of other students and the reluctant supervision of practicing writers who would rather be doing something else, as Cowan puts it: spending “energies [he] might otherwise be directing to [his] own writing”^{vi} then it is doing something worse than institutionalising its own students, it is, by failing to

take the opportunities that are open to it and failing to take the practice of Creative Writing research seriously, risking the degradation of writing practice.

What is required is for universities to find ways of fostering all forms of writing practice^{vii} and to disseminate material produced under their aegis, when necessary by-passing the commercial environment, and to develop a research and publication culture within Creative Writing that acts as a genuinely independent space for literary endeavour.

In summary, the adherence to the myth of a writer's isolation is a handing over of influence to a critically compromised commercial environment, which currently has no interest in writing more overweening than that words can be used to sell the paper upon which they are printed. To characterise as institutionalised those writers who seek support in academia is short-sighted. They are only "the least committed to succeeding or failing as writers" if the environment they produce into, and the writers it employs, are incapable of offering anything more than that which the commercial environment already offers, and if the yardstick of their success is commercial acceptability. If that is the case, it is inappropriate to blame the writer, who acts in good faith. Universities and Creative Writing departments should attempt to foster and develop all forms of writing practice, and find ways to address the current pressures on writers and their writing.

ⁱ Cowan, A. (2007). "Questions, Questions." *Writing in Education* (41): p.59.

ⁱⁱ At least as it is represented in the UK. It is interesting to note that the same ambivalence is not noticeable in Creative Writing teaching in the USA. See, for example, Robert Dana, ed. (1999) *A Community of Writers: Paul Engle and the Iowa Writers' Workshop*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.* op. cit. note i p.58.

^{iv} Smith, D. (2007). *The Literary Agent (Novel)*, *The Handbook of Creative Writing*, S. L. Earnshaw, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.

^v Stull, W. L. and M. P. Carroll. (2007). "Raymond Carver, 'Beginners', The Original Version of 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love'." from [<http://www.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/Carver.pdf>] *last accessed 16/06/2009*.

^{vi} Cowan, A. (2007). "Questions, Questions." *Writing in Education* (41): p.60.

^{vii} For discussion of the variety of practices that might be ideally taken up in academic environments Dawson, P. (2005) *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, London, Routledge, is a good starting place.

Author's Bio:

Alex Pheby is Lecturer in Creative Writing at The University of Sunderland. He has Master's degrees in both Critical Theory and Creative Writing, and is currently awaiting the viva for a PhD in Creative and Critical Writing from UEA. His first novel, *Grace*, was published in 2009.

Bibliography:

Cowan, A. (2007). "Questions, Questions." *Writing in Education* (41)

Dana, R. ed. (1999) *A Community of Writers: Paul Engle and the Iowa Writers' Workshop*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press

Dawson, P. (2005). *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*. Oxford, Routledge

Harper, G. ed. (2006). *Teaching Creative Writing*. London, Continuum

Sampson, F. (2004). *Creative Writing in Health and Social Care*, London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Smith, D. (2007). The Literary Agent (Novel), *The Handbook of Creative Writing*, S. L. Earnshaw, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press

Stull, W. L. and M. P. Carroll. (2007). "Raymond Carver, 'Beginners', *The Original Version of 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love'.*"

[<http://www.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/Carver.pdf> retrieved 22/02/2010]

Wandor, M. (2008). *The Author is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else*. London, Palgrave Macmillan