

OPINION: What We Say When We *Don't* Talk about Creative Writing

Gerald Graff

I'm always amazed by the things that college faculties never talk about, apparently just because nobody makes us talk about them. Take writing, for example. You would think that we would occasionally come together to discuss questions such as "Is writing in the sciences fundamentally different from writing in the humanities or are there important areas of convergence?" and "What is good academic writing anyway?" The answers to such questions are far from self-evident, and you might suppose that we would feel the need for some consensus on them, to help us cope with our own writing challenges if not to help our students with theirs. Yet I've never seen or heard of any college faculty meeting to discuss such questions. It's evidently assumed that we already agree on them and thus don't need to discuss them or that we disagree on them, so discussing them would probably get us nowhere.

The connection between creative writing and conventional literary study is another of the many questions about writing—and more broadly about the nature of academic intellectual culture—that we avoid discussing just because we can. I've been teaching for more than forty years and have never heard of an English department meeting to discuss the philosophical relationship between its creative writing program and the "regular" literature program. Are writing stories and poems and writing critical and expository essays about stories and poems fundamentally different, antithetical, or convergent activities? And what in turn is the relationship between the writing that students do in creative writing courses or in conventional literature courses to the writing that they do in composition courses?

Instead of discussing such questions, we pass the buck to the students, by instituting coverage requirements that essentially leave it up to them to connect what

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the department and the college cannot. We require that those who major or minor in creative writing cover a number of literary periods and genres. How or whether students integrate their creative writing courses with their courses in literature, composition, or theory is left largely to students to figure out on their own. If they discover a relationship between creative writing and conventional literary study—more power to them, but if they don't, that's okay too.

I'm not questioning the need for a specialized division of functions in departments—such specialization is essential in any complex organization. I'm questioning the failure to connect the specialized functions, something that would require that we not only talk to each other about the connections but actually work together in our teaching, as apparently we can't imagine. Leaving it up to the students to figure things out on their own is apparently a lot easier than working together or having sustained conversations with our colleagues about what our goals are and how well we are achieving them. This is especially so for creative writing and literature, an always tense and uneasy relationship that became more tense and uneasy with the advent of "Theory" in the 1970s and 1980s.

I got a close-up view of how deep that tension and uneasiness could be when I served as an external reviewer of the English department at a private research university some years ago and had back-to-back conferences with the creative writers and the literary theorists. When I tried to calm the fears of the writers, who clearly thought that the department had been the object of a hostile takeover by the theorists, one of them replied, "Dr. Graff, you have to understand: these people are *crazy*. Their goal is to destroy literature!" The theorists, on their side, conveyed amused contempt toward the creative writers. The writers characterized themselves as practice-oriented, hostile, or indifferent to literary criticism, to say nothing of theory, while the theorists looked down condescendingly on contemporary writing. It struck me that what each hostile faction needed was to listen to the other, but their structural separation safely insulated them from any possibility of doing that.

In my reviewer's report, I suggested (in elegantly sanitized bureaucratic prose) that the dean lock these embattled colleagues in a room and not let them out until they agreed on how to work together. My recommendation was ignored, which was no surprise. Given the pressures that they face, it's hard to fault administrators for managing faculty turf wars by keeping warring colleagues isolated from each other in separate programs, offices, and courses so that they can't bicker publicly and presumably embarrass the institution. Still, I believe that administration would become easier and more rewarding in the long run if the approach to conflict management changed from smothering or neutralizing faculty differences to harnessing those differences to create a campus intellectual community.

Now that the theory wars have lost some of their intensity, the hostility between creative writers and theorists may have decreased, but I still don't see many

signs of curricular collaboration between these factions—or, for that matter, between creative writers and scholars or critics, or between any of these groups and teachers of rhetoric and composition. But the split between creative writing and literature is just one of many such structural separations that make the very notion of an “English department” something of a euphemism or polite fiction, insofar as the term claims to denote some commitment held in common by all factions. The English department is actually a collection of discrete subdepartments that engage in little serious communication about the intellectual issues that potentially transcend their divisions. Just as creative writing and conventional literary study are virtually separate departments, similar degrees of separation exist between linguistics, English as a Second Language, theory, and minority and multicultural literatures, as well as between each of the literary periods and genres. These separations in turn are mirrored by those between English, foreign languages, philosophy, history, and the other departments in the university.

But not only is there little communication *between* creative writing and literature (or between linguistics and minority literatures), there is also little communication *within* these programs, which is a way of saying that there’s a certain element of wishful thinking in our very use of the word “program”—which rarely means anything more than a set of unconnected courses that happen to be on roughly the same topic. It’s not as if department medievalists or twentieth-century specialists meet to review whatever it is they have in common—or not—and how or whether it is coming across to students.

But so what? Aren’t we better off in the long run not discussing these troublesome topics with our colleagues, given the extra time and work such discussions would entail, not to mention the good chance of seriously bruised feelings resulting from such discussions? I confess that I too enjoy the advantages of going my own way and not having to converse with my colleagues about much besides our children or the fortunes of our local sports teams. On the other hand, I think that our isolation from each other, which deprives us of the possibility of helping each other, makes our jobs harder and less pleasurable in the long run—not least by depriving our students of a continuing conversation that they might join, by leaving them confused about the relationships between courses and instructors, and by forcing them to start over virtually from scratch with every new instructor. Ultimately, the disconnection between instructors reproduces itself as a disconnection between our students and our discipline and the intellectual world that we represent.

In the case of the structural separation between creative writing and literature, what is lost is the rich educational potential of the complex relationships between creativity, scholarship, and critical analysis, including the troubled history of these practices that took on its modern form in the conflict between the Ancients and Moderns at the end of the seventeenth century. It was in that conflict, erupting at

the same time as literary criticism itself emerged with the rise of middle-class culture and the popular press, that the creative and the critical spirit first came to be dramatically pitted against each other. Defenders of the Ancients (which meant classical Greek and Roman writers and sometimes also included Shakespeare and the Elizabethans) argued that any creative triumphs that contemporary Moderns might achieve were rendered inherently inferior by their belatedness, which brought with it a fatal self-consciousness that separated the studied creations of the Moderns from the unselfconscious, spiritually unified creations of the Ancients, those giants before the flood.

This conflict between the robustly unreflective creativity of the Ancients and the more refined and sophisticated but neurotically divided critical thought of the Moderns became a central theme in European romanticism, as epitomized, for example, in the contrast drawn by Friedrich Schiller between “Naïve” and “Sentimental” poetry. The contrast was perhaps most succinctly summed up by the poet Heinrich Heine, who wrote that “once the world was whole, in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. There was still a unity in the world and there were complete poets. We rightfully honor these poets and take pleasure in their poetry, but any aping of their wholeness is a lie” (qtd. in Eder). This conflict between unified, creative Ancients and self-divided, hypercritical Moderns foreshadowed a number of subsequent oppositions, such as the opposition between smugly conventional bourgeois society and the new class of alienated “intellectuals,” between popular and high culture, and between middlebrow common readers and rarefied academic critics and theorists. It also anticipated the nostalgia of romantic and postromantic views of modern history as a great fall from the premodern “organic culture” into the “dissociation of sensibility,” in T. S. Eliot’s famous phrase (1103), that was allegedly the legacy of modern science, industrialism, and individualistic liberal democracy.

As this quick sketch suggests, the creative writing and conventional critical tracks of the English major reflect an opposition between creativity and criticism that lies deep in the roots of modern culture. Yet, except for the occasional honors or capstone course, perhaps, literature departments do little to activate and take educational advantage of this rich history. Because it fails to become part of the object of study, the tension between creative writing and criticism (or theory) is expressed symptomatically, in the turf wars between academic factions, on the one hand, and, on the other, in some students’ election of creative writing in order to avoid or limit their encounters with scholarship and criticism, which they’ve experienced as dry, arid, and lifeless.

In short, as long as we avoid addressing this long-standing conflict between creativity and criticism, we seem doomed to repeat it in less heroic forms. The longing for the wholeness of the Greek tragedians, which writers such as Schiller, Hegel, Goethe, and Mann ached to replicate but saw that they could only view from be-

yond the historical abyss, is replayed by the high school or college student who finds writing stories and poems “cooler” than analyzing or making arguments about them.

It’s all a far cry from the vision that originally inspired the establishment of creative writing programs in the American university. As I noted in *Professing Literature*, when the New Humanist Norman Foerster founded the graduate program in creative writing in 1931 at the University of Iowa that eventually evolved into the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, his goal was to build a bridge between academic humanities scholarship, which was then almost exclusively antiquarian, and contemporary creativity (138). But the separatist dynamics of the university set in quickly, and creative writing and conventional literary study drifted increasingly apart, until today, as I’ve suggested, the two resemble partners in a bad marriage, who long ago gave up trying to discuss their differences.¹

A key factor in giving philosophical legitimacy to this separation was the distinction that modern critics and theorists have made in an endless variety of different versions between literary language and “ordinary” language or everyday practical communication, which presumably includes literary criticism. This distinction first emerged in reaction to the rise of the modern empirical sciences in the late seventeenth century, subsequently evolved during the romantic period into an opposition between the creative imagination and the reasoning or calculating faculties, and became a virtual dogma in the 1940s and 1950s in the poetic theorizing of the New Critics, who starkly opposed the language of poetry to the utilitarian language of science, commerce, advertising, and political propaganda. As a 1934 handbook on the study of literature put it, “The peculiar quality of poetry can be distinguished from that of prose if one thinks of the creative mind as normally expressing itself in a variety of literary forms ranged along a scale between the two extremes of scientific exposition and lyrical verse.” As the writers added, in contrast to the approach of science and practical discourse, “the approach of poetry is indirect. It proceeds by means of suggestion, implication, reflection. Its method is largely symbolical, more interested in connotations than in denotations” (Walley and Wilson 143).

This comment anticipated Cleanth Brooks’s 1947 book, *The Well Wrought Urn*, which (along with Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s 1936 textbook, *Understanding Poetry*) did more than any other book to popularize such New Critical theories of literature and disseminate them in classrooms. Brooks wrote that “the tendency of science is necessarily to stabilize terms, to freeze them into strict denotations; the poet’s tendency is by contrast disruptive. The terms are continually modifying each other, and thus violating their dictionary meanings” (9). Whereas the method of science “can be direct,” the “method of art can, I believe, never be direct—is always indirect” (10). In another of the innumerable versions of this opposition, whereas science and ordinary practical discourse make statements “about” things, literary discourse is uniquely marked by its avoidance of such statements. A literary work is

“autonomous” or self-sufficient, which is to say it is “about” itself, or it “embodies” the knowledge that it can be said to represent in a form that can’t be paraphrased or adequately represented in any other language than that of the work itself. Or, as Archibald MacLeish summed up the theory in his poem “Ars Poetica,” in lines that the New Critics often quoted to drive home their point: “A poem should not mean/ But be” (269).

MacLeish’s point was itself paradoxical: although appearing in a poem, the claim that “a poem should not mean but be”—if a text is poetry, it can’t make any statement—is itself patently a statement, a didactic one, no less. In another version of the paradox, if the language of poetry and other literary works inherently resists paraphrase—as Brooks explicitly argued in an appendix to *The Well Wrought Urn* entitled “The Heresy of Paraphrase”—what do we do with critical accounts of poetic “meanings” and “themes” (including those by New Critics), which often look like statements about the world?

It was the romantic scholar Morse Peckham in a 1965 book who may have best exposed the theory’s logical equivocations by simply summarizing it:

poetry [the New Critics claim] has a unique kind of semantic structure which reveals a unique kind of truth. Poetry says things which cannot be said in any other language. And what’s more, we shall now tell you in non-poetic language what that meaning is that cannot be said in non-poetic language, though, for this reason, you must not imagine that you will know what that meaning is. That meaning can only be experienced; it cannot be known. (1)

Despite such telling critiques—and later ones, which were even more sustained and devastating, by Mary Louise Pratt in *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* and Terry Eagleton in his Introduction (“What Is Literature?”) to *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1–16)—the opposition between literary and nonliterary discourse continued to be widely held or assumed in departments of literature, whose justification for being autonomous departments may indeed depend on it.

Although the ghost of the New Critics’ literary/ordinary language opposition still hovers vaguely over literary studies, the fact that we no longer debate such matters (and perhaps never did, except in publications and at conferences) makes it hard to say to what extent the opposition is still alive and well today. On the one hand, post-structuralism is often said to have done away with the very idea of “literature” by assimilating it to “textuality” or “discourse.” On the other hand, some versions of post-structuralism seem to reinstate literary exceptionalism, by seeing literature as a uniquely self-deconstructing discourse or as a discourse that is systematically more aware of itself as discourse or as fiction than are other forms of communication. The opposition between literary and nonliterary discourse seems also to have been reinforced by the hardening of the separation between literary study and composition, which, in turn, is deepened and reified by the two-tier sys-

tem in which the “regular” faculty teaches literature and mostly graduate students and contingent faculty members teach composition.² But whatever the status of the opposition between literary and nonliterary language may be today, what seems unquestioned is that the institutional counterpart of this opposition is still with us in the separation between creative writing and the scholarly and critical study of literature. Again, things don’t figure to change as long as there is little departmental discussion of the relationship between the study of these different forms of writing.

Another way to put what I have been saying is that we have never come to terms with the conflict between primary creation of literature and secondary scholarship or criticism about literature. Consider the ambiguity that still surrounds terms such as “teaching literature” and “studying literature,” which are easily understood as implying an unmediated encounter between students and literary works, as opposed to an encounter necessarily mediated by secondary critical discourse. To study literature necessarily means producing secondary critical discourse about literature, in the obvious sense that literature students typically don’t write epic poems and novels, but critical essays about epics and novels. Even in creative writing courses, in which students do write fiction, poems, or dramas (if not epics), class discussion is necessarily conducted in critical discourse, however informal. The point may seem self-evident, but literature students often fail to recognize—and some literature teachers indignantly deny—that studying literature necessarily has anything to do with learning to speak and write the language of criticism. This is another way of saying that students often fail to appreciate the difference between reading or enjoying literature as a recreational pastime and studying literature in an academic institution.

The failure to address this distinction in class leaves literature instructors vulnerable to the disappointment that students often register in the familiar complaint that the pleasure they took in reading as children has been killed by their having been forced in literature courses to analyze literary works for symbolism or hidden meaning. It is this disillusionment that often inspires the student decision to elect the creative writing track in order to get as far away as possible from conventional literary critical study. But even English majors who stay in the conventional literature track—including some who go on to graduate school and get PhDs in literature—never come to terms with the proposition (if they grasp it at all) that studying literature, unlike enjoying it in one’s spare time, entails mastering the discourse of criticism.

This way of thinking about literary study, which sees critical discourse as, at best, an irrelevance and, at worst, an alien intrusion on the love and enjoyment of literature, is not limited to students; it characterizes much of our culture’s view of the arts as essentially a form of leisure entertainment and consumption rather than of serious intellectual work. One symptom of this view is Sunday-supplement desig-

nations such as “Arts and Leisure” or “Arts and Fun”; another is the largely anti-intellectual character of what often passes for “Arts Education” in primary and secondary schools. Here is perhaps the most fundamental of the questions that we educators avoid addressing with each other and with our students: is art a sphere of intellectual work or a healing respite from the alienation and conflict of intellectual work? Students often remain confused about these questions, with some, as I’ve noted, coming away from literature courses feeling that reading has been spoiled for them by the pressure to analyze and argue.

I have criticized English departments for avoiding discussion of the relationship between creative writing and conventional literary study and allowing these things to drift further apart. My discussion raises the question of how this drift might be arrested, how creative writing and conventional literary study could begin to work together as parts of an integrated program, which should include the rhetoric and composition program as well. Unless English departments begin a discussion of these questions, nothing is likely to change, but I doubt that change will happen unless upper administrators—deans and provosts—provide the encouragement and the incentives to change. Given some leadership from that quarter, making connections between creative writing and literature (and composition) should not be difficult. A first step would be to establish courses—those in contemporary periods are an obvious place to start—that are team-taught by members of the creative writing and the regular literature faculties. A second step is to begin pairing creative writing and literature courses, in which a common cohort of students would take the same two courses together, the way cohorts of first-year students at some campuses take a paired first-year writing course and a general education course.³

An obvious place to start in bringing creative writers, critics, and theorists together in the same course or in paired courses would be to take advantage of the confluence in many creative literary works themselves of criticism, theory, and philosophy. Think, for example, of Wallace Stevens, Thomas Mann, John Barth, Umberto Eco, Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, and the Language Poets, to name just a few writers who, in some cases, are actually assigned in philosophy courses. The more one lists such names, the more arbitrary the division comes to seem between creative and other forms of writing.

Even though departments and instructors probably need a period of trial and error to find the best ways of integrating creative and critical courses, the important thing for now is to start the process going and build on its successes. We have got so used to the separations between departmental components that these separations seem facts of nature or aspects of the academic condition, if not the human condition. The most damaging impact of these separations is on the curriculum and on students. Ultimately, the separations between departmental areas become reproduced in the separation between our discipline itself—and, by extension, academic

culture itself—and our students, who lose sight of the larger contexts of their studies as they move from one isolated subfield to another and one unconnected course to another. In my view, given how professionally overtaxed most of us now are, the only way that our divisions are likely to be overcome is in the curriculum, by our connecting courses in the different domains. We are unlikely to start talking to each other until we start teaching with each other.

NOTES

1. For a history of the emergence of creative writing and its separation from conventional literary studies, see Myers.
2. For an acute dissection of this invidious system of oppositions, see Scholes 1–17.
3. For an argument in favor of course pairing, see my essay “Bringing Writing in from the Cold.”

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