

Creative Writing Studies, Authorship, and the Ghosts of Romanticism

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The paper examines creative writing studies' accounts of authorship in light of developments in print culture studies over the past decade. Creative writing studies provides an analysis of the tasks and procedures of the creative writer, at least, the writer within the creative writing program. The figure of the author within creative writing studies is, mostly, constrained to accounts of the writer–researcher within the university. By way of contrast, print culture studies examines authorship and the figure of the author in their wider institutional, economic, and cultural contexts, mostly beyond the university. This paper advocates augmenting current approaches to creative writing studies with a concern: i) to develop itself as an expert discipline on creative writing processes more broadly than creative writing as undertaken within the university; and ii) to examine more fully authorship and the figure of the author outside the university.

Key words: *Creative Writing Studies; Authorship; Print Culture Studies*

It is a commonplace that over the past twenty years universities have taken to creative writing as a practice and research based

discipline. As a practical discipline, creative writing has focused on equipping the individual writer with the skills to produce particular kinds of creative works—mostly fiction, poetry, and creative non-fiction—and on facilitating the development of these works (Dawson 1). This is in keeping with the general expansion of creative arts training out of conservatoriums and art colleges and into universities, and with the development of new intermediaries between the writer and publisher—such as writers' centres and manuscript appraisal services. As a research discipline—what I call here *creative writing studies* rather than *creative writing*—the discipline has developed a modest program with three apparent preoccupations: i) the pedagogy of creative writing (see for example, Costello; and Glastonbury); ii) creative writing's constitution as an academic discipline and its epistemological status (of which this article is a type)—that is, investigations into the kinds of knowledge creative writing studies produces particularly through research by creative practice (see as examples, Owen; Lynch; and Nelson); and iii) the compositional aspects of individual creative practice (see examples, Dennis; and Brady). These preoccupations have been taken up through research higher degrees, in academic journals, such as this one and *Text: the Journal of Australasian Association of Writing Programs*, and in a relatively small number of books (see, for example, Krauth; Dawson; Myers; and Harper and Kroll). The research program

for creative writing studies constitutes part of the foundation of the discipline in the Australian and UK context. Understandably, the research program in this constitutive phase has often been inward looking and has included defences of, and manifestos for, the discipline (see Webb and Brien). This is tacit acknowledgment that the discipline has in part been shaped by the institutional conditions in which it exists. For example, the systems for the quantification and evaluation of research in the United Kingdom and Australia have led to direct responses within creative writing studies. These include the development of arguments for how the basic outputs of creative writing can be conceived of as research (see special issue 8 of *TEXT*).

One of the other foundational tasks for creative writing studies has been to position itself in relation to its adjacent disciplines, particularly literary studies. Sometimes, creative writing studies describes itself as a radical break from literary studies, but elsewhere it seeks to identify the continuities. Dawson, for example, presents creative writing studies as a new inflection of literary studies rather than a departure from it (179). And beyond literary studies, creative writing studies shares ground and boundaries with rhetoric and composition, communication studies, the history of the book (encompassing at least studies of authorship, publishing, and reading), some aspects of media studies, cultural studies and cultural policy studies, studies in bibliography and linguistics. This is not to

mention professional disciplines in librarianship, editing, journalism, or the somewhat neglected fields of the sociology of literature and philology. At the same time that creative writing studies has emerged in this broad field, there have been parallel refurnishings of a number of adjacent disciplines, not least print culture studies (see Murray 3-25) and even literary studies itself (see Dixon in relation to the new empiricism of Australian literary studies; and see Moretti more widely).

In this contested and unresolved domain I wish to reflect on creative writing studies' somewhat partial conceptualisation of the author and of authorship—which here, after Foucault, I distinguish from the writer and writing. Creative writing studies' preoccupation with the writer and with writing is dominated by a concern with the procedures and techniques of writing. It atomises and systematizes the choices writers make and the effects of these choices. Or as Dawson explains, the text “is scutinised in terms of the process of its making, rather than as a literary artefact”. In this, creative writing studies is nominally anti-*Romanticist*. The discipline's primary concerns and methods—compositional decision-making examined through self-exegesis—resist Romanticism's tendency to ablate the writer's rationality. But while creative writing studies has done much to investigate the acts and procedures of writing—in particular as it is undertaken within creative writing programs

and the university—the discipline has little to say about authorship or the author. Following print culture studies, we might define the author as the professional personality that is produced by the conditions of authorship; and more radically, following Foucault, we can define the author function as the name, sign, or constructed identity under which the writer operates and under which the writing is produced and apprehended.

Creative writing studies has, in conceptualisation and in practical effect, advanced the idea of a new kind of author. This is the creative writer who works within a creative writing program, either as a staff member or student: a figure we might nominate as the *writer-researcher*. Creative writing studies through its very research methods of self-exegesis and of self-audit brings this figure of the writer as researcher into being. It is, of course, almost exclusively a figure of the university, although in the Australian context, novelist Kate Grenville has in her 2005 work, *The Secret River*, and its companion, *Searching for the Secret River*, established the value of a major novelist attending openly to the questions the responsibility of the novelist and the responsibilities of historical fiction. Yet creative writing studies, in its focus on the *writer-researcher* has comparatively little to say about creative writing as it is undertaken outside of the university and little to say about the author as a figure and function as it exists outside of creative

writing programs. By way of contrast, print culture studies examines authorship in its institutional, economic, and cultural contexts. In this way, print culture studies and creative writing studies each provide something of a complement or corrective to the other. Here, I am most concerned with what print culture studies offers creative writing studies and with the limits of creative writing studies' particular approach to writing and the particularities of its neglect of authorship.

Print culture studies, publishing studies, and the history of the book are terms for the recent scholarly interest in the institutions of literature and literary practices (hereafter mostly I will prefer the term print culture studies)—including the organisation of publishing and book selling, reading practices, the public manifestations and uses of literary or textual culture, and the material conditions of authorship, (again see Murray 3-25, but also the “State of Discipline” series in *Book History Journal*). These fields have a number of starting points not least in traditional literary studies; yet, in their contemporary formation they also owe something to media studies' and cultural studies' shared concern with cultural institutions. They constitute a necessarily diverse field.

Christine Haynes, in a survey of book history's recent accounts of authorship, argues that the last ten years have been a particularly busy time for the study of both contemporary and

historical authorship. As she sees it, book history's concern with authorship can be characterised as *historicist* (288); that is, it focuses on the external conditions of authorship—seeing authorship produced out of these conditions. Historicist accounts, for example, suggest the author is just one figure in the communications circuit of the book, which might look something like: author—agent—editor and publisher—bookseller—reader. Each of these figures operates within and is partially produced by, technological, economic, social, political, and cultural contexts that vary over time and with setting. These figures then do much to reproduce the very environments in which they exist.

Haynes's account identifies five main scholarly preoccupations in relation to authorship: the origins of the material and moral rights of the author; dramatic authorship; women, gender and authorship; the cultural construction of authors as a class or occupation; and authorial practices, including collaborative authorship and author-publisher relations (291-310). Within these topics, conceptions of authorship vary. In the most radical versions (after Foucault), and not necessarily one Haynes advocates, authors are but products of discourses that bring the figure of the author and the practices of writing into being. For example, David Saunders in *Authorship and Copyright* goes so far as to reject the author as any kind of 'aesthetic personality' and instead presents the

author as a 'legal construct' based around an early modern European concern with private property (Haynes 294). More typical though is a mixing-in of a concern with the author as an institutionalised figure with that of the author as a 'creative' figure.

Haynes's major contribution is to point to a contradiction in print culture studies' conceptions of authorship. While the author operates as an economic category—a figure produced out of economic conditions—it also persists as an 'individual, autonomous, and inspired figure'. That is, we still have the author in its most Romantically individuated form—organised around the idea of *genius*. Typical here is Paul K. Saint-Armour's *The Copywrights: Intellectual Property and Literary Imagination* in which the idea of original *genius* has its own history—but it is one tethered to the expansion of copyright. For Saint-Armour, it is authors (above all others) who promulgate the idea of individual *genius*—as one strategy to expand their economic rights (in Haynes 294-95). Hence, authorship is an economic category, but the idea of *genius* is vital to it—as it simultaneously advances and obscures these economic interests. Under such a scheme, Romantic conceptions of authorship become functionalist rather than essentialist.

In contrast, creative writing studies prefers the figure of the writer to the figure of the author. To those in creative writing studies, print culture studies' representations of

authorship and its focus on context can seem partial. Neither the reduction of authorship to an economic category nor its elevation to that of simple *genius* captures how creative writing studies understands the writer. Creative writing studies emphasizes other elements, particularly i) the employment and problematization of technique (see Stark for an example), ii) the procedures of the writer—that is, the centrality of a writer’s objectives and choices in the creation of the work (see Sondheim) and iii) the ethical (that is, social) aspects of the writer within the university (see Edmonds). These interests add to our understanding of writing through fine-grained accounts of the production of manuscripts: for example, the use of story, character, focalisation, and language; the ethical issues encountered; and the political possibilities of the text. Further, these accounts have the advantage of providing ordered analysis of the processes of writing by the individuals who most closely participate in, and most closely observe, the process, even if these come with all of the limits of self. These features also bring a new conception of the writer into being, one demanded by the conditions of academic work: an ethical, technically competent *writer-researcher*.

But before creative writing studies draws great satisfaction from what it brings to our understanding of writing practices, we might acknowledge its limits. Firstly, creative writing studies’ conception of writing as aesthetic, technical, or

procedural tasks usually only extends to the processes and writing tasks undertaken within creative writing programs. There is little recognition that the processes and procedures of writing outside the university—which make up the greater share of all acts of writing—constitute themselves somewhat differently from those carried on within it. While there are marked exceptions (see Lodge; and Forster) the public writer often says little about the issues faced in creating their work. Secondly, creative writing studies’ accounts of the writer usually proceed as far as the completion of the manuscript, but no further (see, for example, Simms). This means while there is a regular concern with a work’s relationship to its university context, these accounts provide little sense of a work’s relationship to the publishing industry, to processes of editing, or to modes of external reception. In a sense, while interested in the writer, creative writing studies is not interested in the public figure of the author.

This leaves creative writing studies in a paradoxical relationship to the logic of Romanticism. On one hand, creative writing studies’ analysis of the procedures of writing resists Romanticism’s conception, in Blake’s hands at least, of poetic creation as an act of the “Divine Body in every Man” (in Dawson 30). For creative writing studies, writing is more mundane. It involves the rational mind in concert with the imagination. But on the other hand, creative writing studies, in its intense focus

on the writing of the manuscript, tends through omission to replicate some of the pretences of Romanticist constructions of authorship: that authorship happens alone; that publishing is a meritocratic process; or that publication has no relationship to merit at all.

In doing so, creative writing studies neglects some of what we know about writing and authorship from print culture studies: that writing happens within specific cultural and institutional contexts; and that, usually, personal and external constructions of the author figure are tied to the individual author's negotiation of the institutions of print culture. That is, it is not the production of a manuscript alone that constitutes an act of writing or authorship, instead, it is the ability to create a manuscript that is then produced or reproduced in the public sphere. Outside of creative writing studies, the commonplace concept of an author requires more than the creation of the manuscript, it requires the publication of the manuscript. Being able to create a manuscript is barely considered to be of any value whatsoever. Only publication valorises the document and the writer, thereby creating the author.

Print culture studies reminds us that rather than being valorised figures, most writers, in fact, are politically, financially, and, even, artistically contingent. All but the most successful writers are open to a type of contempt—even from within the literary industry—and writers in creative writing programs

particularly so (Moorhouse). Few authors can live off what they do. The figures vary, but outside journalism the average Australian author earns somewhere around \$4800 each year from creative writing (Australia Council). Thus the successful author, or even the author that can comfortably claim *author* status, is not just someone that can produce a manuscript but is the person that has already taken on board and negotiated the operations of literary institutions and the political, social, and economic context of their work. For print culture studies, authorship extends beyond creativity, beyond the assimilation and deployment of technique, and beyond the knowledge of and the replication of forms of writing (the things creative writing studies focuses upon) to include an application of judgement about the literary institutions within which the individual writer functions. Print culture studies gives us more realistic accounts than creative writing studies of the conditions of authorship and their impact on the text: say, how patterns of literary patronage in the seventeenth century influenced what was written and what was published (see Griffith); or how Eugene Scribe's mechanization of dramatic writing in nineteenth century gave us two hundred 'well-made plays' (Turney).

Implications

It is beyond my scope here to fully account for the relations, intersections, contradictions, absences, emphases, biases, and

fantasies among the overlapping and occasionally antagonistic disciplines and sub-disciplines that I have mentioned above. I do, however, wish to underline that creative writing studies exists in a complex field of scholarship which is also interested in the production of text, its publication and dissemination, and its consumption and use. Yet creative writing studies, beyond its concern with the looming shadow of literary studies, does not always acknowledge the broader field of scholarly activity in which it operates, nor does it seek to engage with it. In this paper I have tried to lay out how creative writing studies might profitably borrow from print culture studies an interest in i) writing activity beyond the university, and ii) the conditions of authorship, again, beyond the university.

I suggest the stronger links between creative writing studies and print culture studies not just to nominate the limits of creative writing studies as a new discipline. Instead, I offer it because creative writing studies is already expert in how creative writing work is undertaken within the university, and it has already sketched out the requirements and practices of a new kind of literary function and personality: the writer as university researcher. As such, the discipline is ideally placed to contribute to our understanding of the broader process of the creative writer and of literary activity, particularly the contemporary processes. And that creative writing studies is probably better placed to pursue such a research interest than,

say, contemporary literary studies.

This suggests a new set of questions for creative writing studies, including how writers decide what work to produce, how writers judge their approach to the writing task, how writers market their work to publishers and their intermediaries, the public tasks of authorship, and how to develop the act of writing into a career or a practice. In effect, creative writing studies might profit from beginning to account for how the contemporary author negotiates literary institutions, and particularly how the institutional constraints and possibilities for authorship interact with the process of writing. This is where text and context meet.

To some small extent this is happening in the existing research dedicated to the task of making the discipline. In Australia, at least, creative writing studies has closely tracked the outcome of manuscripts produced its higher degree students (Boyd). More lately, it has considered the implications for the discipline and for the writer of university research evaluation exercises (Krauth, Webb, & Brien 2010). But creative writing studies has potentially much to say about writing and authorship as it happens outside of the university as well as what happens within it. To not look at the tasks of writing and the conditions of authorship outside of writing programs is to leave the discipline in a self-referential cycle. The public utility of creative writing studies widens as the discipline's focus

widens from compositional and teaching activity within the university to compositional activity and the organisation of production and reading outside of it.

But a different focus may require a retooling of the discipline's methods. The *writer-researcher*, in providing an account of their own writing, or of their own teaching, is, often enough, involved in processes of self reporting or self auditing. These methods—and their very ethical and epistemological demands—help bring the new literary role and personality, the *writer-researcher*, into being. This figure is marked by a wholly admiral critical self-reflection. It is a figure that seeks to both deploy and generate critical knowledge through processes of informed, reflexive creation and practice. To look wider than oneself to the broader literary domain will however require something different from critical self reflection. There are methods aplenty to borrow and adapt from our companion disciplines—ways of reading texts, of constructing interactions between multiple agents, of representing the culture and practices of identifiable groups, and so on—but it is unclear yet how creative writing studies might take these up and to what effect.

I acknowledge that it is all well and good, and, in fact, too easy to point out the absences in the research program of any academic discipline. And this paper does nothing to identify the many exceptions to its characterisation of creative writing studies as self-referential (see most obviously *Text Special Issue 4* on literature and public culture). But, that acknowledged, my question for my own discipline is how we might profitably widen our gaze to the broader domain of literary activity. This is not just to develop our expertise, but to deploy it. In some senses, the research program of creative writing studies in Australia and United Kingdom over the past two decades has been produced by its institutional conditions. We have been in a phase of discipline making. And we have responded to the requirement to conceive of ourselves as researchers. But to look outside ourselves and to look further outside the university might begin to mark the movement of the discipline of creative writing studies from a phase of self constitution to one which investigates its other possibilities for public utility.

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