

Writing the Million-Petalled Flower

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Opening

Creative writing flourishes independently of rational understanding. Novelist and critic David Lodge observes, “Even the most sophisticated literary criticism only scratches the surface of the mysterious process of creativity; and so, by the same token, does even the best course in creative writing.” (178) Meanwhile, writers and scholars continue to inquire into the nature and workings of creative writing, recognizing that ultimate answers will elude. Sustained pursuit of the questions can yield, as poet and essayist Jane Hirshfield explains, “some sense of approaching more nearly a destination whose center cannot ever be mapped or reached.” (vii-viii) The first section of this article considers several strands in contemporary thinking on creative writing, the commonly encountered suggestions that the activity: 1) imparts pleasure; 2) strengthens powers of expression; 3) activates the imagination; 4) yields insights into life; 5) promotes self-realization; and 6) invents worlds. The second section of the article nominates an alternative and embracing interpretation of the creative writing – as interface with nonmaterial reality.

1. The Securing of Provision

Creative writing refers to the generation of stories, poetry, drama, and creative nonfiction, or any other genre in which the primary aspiration is other than faithful accounting of our physical world. Humans engage in creative language use from cradle to grave, and we have apparently done so since time immemorial. Creative language use takes both written and oral modes and figures prominently in storytelling and everyday personal conversation. The activity of creative writing implicates creative reading, and the field of creative writing overlaps to a significant degree with the discipline of literature, broadly conceived. The six interpretations of creative writing discussed in this section appear widely in creative writing disciplinary literature: writing guidebooks, anthology forewords, critical works, author essays and interviews, and so on. While presented discretely

in order to facilitate discussion, the conceptions are overlapping and mutually implicative, and the list is far from exhaustive.

Creative writing imparts pleasure. Creative language use delights and pleases. “We write for the satisfaction of having wrestled a sentence to the page,” writer and teacher Janet Burroway explains, “for the rush of discovering an image, for the excitement of seeing a character come alive.” (*Fiction*, 1) At the same time, the pleasure found in creative writing is a complex construct. Creative writings incorporate the full span of human feelings and emotions, from the upbeat and reaffirming to the troubling and unsettling; joy and contentment, but also ambivalence, loneliness, despair. Conflict – often but not invariably followed by response and resolution – is frequently identified as an indispensable element in compelling writing; it is “the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and sweat,” explains novelist William Faulkner. (119) This coming to terms with the wide range of human experience and affect through the writing process is not easily effected. Fiction writer Alice Munro explains:

It may not look like pleasure, because the difficulties can make me morose and distracted, but that’s what it is – the pleasure of telling the story I mean to tell as wholly as I can tell it, of finding out in fact what the story is, by working around the different ways of telling it. (ii)

Writing demands perseverance through an extensive and intensive process of drafting. The formal requirements of creative writing contribute to its demanding quality. Written language consists of forms and patterns, regular and irregular, of escalating complexity. In the writing, any flights of expansive freedom are tempered by the exacting demands of formality. Concentration and continuous discipline lead to an immersive, meditative

state in the writer; writing becomes an act of absorption, with the writer, and later the reader, becoming lost in the moment. The braided “pleasure” of creative writing might be rephrased as “the sense of fulfillment which accompanies intense and sustained engagement in what is perceived as a meaningful activity.”

Creative writing strengthens powers of expression. All humans possess latent creative language ability. They fulfill their potential for this through experience; we improve at writing by writing. As writer and teacher Heather Sellers explains, “Creative writing practice helps you become more thoughtful, discerning, and articulate.” (1) Realizing such benefits alone would justify the time and energy expended for many of us. Nonetheless, creative writing skills are capable of being transferred to other writing projects, even creative ones, to only some limited degree. Each writing event stands as both unique and formidably challenging. A work of writing is less a product of dispassionate deployment of tools and skills than an unpredictable outcome of desperate, improvisational abandon. Writing is marked by uncertainty, experimentation, and trial and error. Conscious attention to technique often works at cross-purposes to the unfolding of the writing. Indeed, more often than not, throughout the course of the writing the writer doesn’t even know what it is that she is writing about. “[T]here is all this ambiguity,” poet Derek Mahon observes. “That is poetry. It is the other thing that is the other thing.” (Wroe, 13) Significances are implicit in a story, embodied in image, character, dialogue, action, plot. The writer incrementally feels her way toward discovering what it is that she might desire to word. The writer herself becomes part of an unfolding phenomenon. While it is true that over the longer term, skills develop through practice and reflection, the joy and agony of the writing process, in the immediate time frame the writer is not in control of the writing process; rather, she is at its mercy. Furthermore, meanings are plural for both writer and reader. Poet Paul Valéry suggests, “The proper subject of poetry is what has no simple name, what itself provokes and demands more than one explanation.” (177) Meanings are also affective and experiential, not simply referential. A work of creative writing evokes a psychology and elicits feelings. The music of language

plays a prominent role in creative writing, as well. The music of sounds and rhythms is an important dimension of what a piece of writing communicates and of the experience it raises; how something is said coalesces with what is said. The compulsion to write gives rise to language with a wide range of associative, implicative, and affective meanings. Potency in expression arises from unprecedented writing processes and texts.

Creative writing activates the imagination. The imagination is often upheld as the springhead of creative writing. The imaginative mind transforms documentary material into fiction, parlays life experience and perceptions into the truer than true. The phrases “creative writing” and “imaginative writing” can be used interchangeably and synonymously. “All writing is imaginative,” Burroway explains. “The translation of experience or thought into words is of itself an imaginative process.” (*Imaginative*, 2) Unquestionably, a work of creative writing emerges from the mind of the writer and is then animated in the mind of the reader. When called upon, the imagination operates autonomously, independently, and effortlessly, manipulating and assembling disparate parts into novel combinations. As a construct, “imagination” possesses plausibility and explanatory powers. Imagination envisions that which doesn’t yet exist and aims at an alternative future – within certain limits. Humans cannot imagine *anything*. For example, the imagination could not generate an animal with no resemblance to any previously encountered. The imagination draws on life experience for its creations. In this light, the idea that a work of creative writing springs immaculately from the individual mind becomes substantially qualified. We should perhaps be grateful for any limits to the independent mind; the imagination has been inducted to destructive as well as creative acts. At any rate, to frame a work of creative writing as a fruit of the imagination – which itself is the creative capability – is to simply circle the question of where creative writing comes from. Our everyday and continuous image-making does, however, play a central role in creative writing. Memory, daydream, reflection, and other thought processes, for example, all harness image. Works of creative writing similarly play out visually, in the perfect presents of

images, like films. Images are the vessels through which a work of writing carries, the substance-less matter which gives it body.

Creative writing yields insights into life. Reading and writing creatively prompt human discovery; they endow us wisdom and understanding of people and life, providing orientation and guidance in realms which can surely be opaque and bewildering, and they do so in a grounded, contextualized, non-didactic manner. These foregoing are fundamental tenets of much literary activity and education. Sellers explains:

We don't want our creative writing to lecture us or sermonize; but we want our art forms to indicate wisdom, to outline insights, so that we can come to our own conclusions . . . Good creative writing asks questions and provides insights through careful attention to human experience. (6)

Creative works present experience in its potency yet stripped of its poison. They expose to vicissitudes while allowing poise and composure. Immersion comes through indirection. We experience at a remove, a prospect from which we engage more fully and ably. We vicariously encounter challenges as well as attempts to cope, survive, and thrive, all the while drawing parallels to our own lived experiences. To describe the distinguishing characteristic of creative writing as the provision of insight, though, is, finally, to understate. It would be difficult to articulate a single "insight" that a work of creative writing – even and especially one which influences us profoundly – has provided. Reading and writing impart us fundamental and inexpressible understandings, coloring and shaping our world view. When asked to explain how or why, we begin to retell the entire story, to read the poem aloud. The influential work is impervious to translation into thought, sentence, paraphrase. "A story that is any good can't be reduced; it can only be expanded," fiction writer Flannery O'Connor explains. "A story is good when you continue to see more and more in it, and when it continues to escape you." (530) People refer to such a work as being transforming. By contrast, the simple providing and procuring of insights suggests accumulation of virtue,

merit, qualification in an unspecified way. And to say that writing provides insights into life asserts a separation between writing and understanding, between writing and life. We could more convincingly conceive of creative writing as itself a mode of online understanding and a stream of living.

Creative writing promotes self-realization. The need and desire to understand ourselves more completely can be a strong compulsion for taking up and sustaining writing activities. Writing offers the margins and opportunity to learn about ourselves. Writer and teacher David Morley suggests that writing "may contribute towards self-development and self-awareness . . . assist you with finding perspectives on yourself and others." In writing, he says, "We are creating an entirely fresh piece of space-time, and another version of your *self*." (1) The writer sifts experiences, perceptions, and impressions. She discerns and exerts patterns and a degree of coherence. Each writing and reading encounter creatively interprets and instantiates the self that writes. The process can be full of surprises and dismay when it involves candid, unflinching reflection on our actions and underlying motivations and impulses. Deep responses can be prompted, leading to greater self-awareness, internal integration, and harmonious relations. At the same time, the writing act often leads in very short order to realization of one's own incompleteness, partialness, imperfect realization. The truths that emerge in the course of can be hard ones to recognize and digest. Furthermore, the self, in writing, proves to be a morphing, elusive phenomenon held together, if at all, by an implicit, non-comprehended organizing principle. Creative writing elicits plural selves – in a felicitous manner. Poet Ferdinand Pessoa explains his experience of writing:

I created various personalities within myself. I create them constantly. Every dream, as soon as it is dreamed, is immediately embodied by another person who dreams it instead of me. In order to create, I destroyed myself; I have externalized so much of my inner life that even inside I now exist only externally. (Cover copy)

Writing and reading allow us to channel the limited self into the extended self through the exercise of empathy. Writer and reader engage in empathetic projection into the plural perspectives of multiple others. This enabling operation is effected through the singularity of the speaker. “I believe in all sincerity,” Valéry explains, “that if each man were not able to live a number of other lives besides his own, he would not be able to live his own life.” (58) Finding oneself creatively, then, becomes a project of losing oneself. The dive into self delivers other. Creative writing negotiates the blurred borders between self and world.

Creative writing invents worlds. Settings, characters, dialogue, action, and events in works of creative writing lack physical existence. They come together only in and as the story and partake of no empirical grounding even when they might happen to reference (once) extant people, places, or events. Though lacking physical grounding, these written worlds are replete. Writer and materials teacher Tara Mokhtari describes their emergence, “New knowledge begins to materialize through the way you bend your memories and imagine new possibilities in worlds separate from the one you live in.” (5) Morley similarly explains, “By choosing to act, by writing on that page, we are creating another version of time; we are playing out a new version of existence, of life even.” (1) A work of creative writing raises a rapt experience for readers, as well, who forget themselves and their physical surroundings in inhabiting a parallel world. To say that creative writing invents worlds, however, represents a half-truth. Works of creative writing, as discussed previously, draw upon the life experiences of the writer. This holds equally true for realistic and fantastic writing. In writing an elsewhere, we reference and interpret the here and now. We could hardly do otherwise. The impulse of creative writing is to engage the circumstances of life rather than avoid or escape them. Furthermore, the sense is commonly expressed by writers that a story is uncovered as much as it is constructed. Writer fumbles and feels her way toward a world that already exists, assembling it by interpreting it into language, midwifing the world into sensory dimensions, revealing rather than creating. Literary scholar Timothy Clark documents the historical

and continuing perception among writers that their works are delivered them. Reader, as well, is cued into collaborative re-creation of a world that is at once strange and familiar, reifying it in her own inimitable way. Rather than creating worlds, we might more accurately suggest that creative writing conjures them.

2. A Search for the Inexplicable

Practitioners and teachers of creative writing almost unanimously share the feelings of writer and teacher Lisa Roney, “Creative writing is a worthwhile end in itself – obviously I believe this passionately or I wouldn’t have made it my life’s work.” (15) It can be daunting to try to describe the intrinsic significance of creative writing, however, self-evident as it may feel. In their discrete and concise formulations, the six descriptions of creative writing in the previous section, in fact, fall short of identifying an inherent value to the activity. Rather, they suggest benefits derived through the activity or reformulate it. In their fullest and cumulative iterations, however, the descriptions begin to overlap and faintly intimate an intrinsic significance. When we synthesize the six formulations of the previous section, creative writing emerges as an open-ended exploration of an unknown entity, untethered by a fixed self and amidst uncertainty of what is being taken up other than that the subject is vital and absorbing and reveals itself in the interpretation into language.

Creative writing, this section of the article proposes, can helpfully be conceived of as an activity of interface with what would be our comprehensive nonmaterial reality. Engagement with our immersing environment in its full dimensions would, patently, be intrinsically significant. This conception is speculation and offered as no more than a suggestion submitted for consideration. It is based on circumstantial evidence and lacks any empirical grounding. It was generated by feeling backward from engaged and sustained experience (creative reading and writing) to what might plausibly be true – resembling, in this sense, the process of writing. The conception should be estimated as no more and no less than a piece of creative writing itself, and hopefully will be engaged in the same spirit as a story, drama, poem, or work of creative nonfiction.

What qualities would the nonmaterial reality which creative writing engages manifest? To be sure, the nonmaterial reality would be a baffling and inscrutable realm. It would encompass everything, the unbound and borderless with no beginning or end. It could not be ascribed a location – within, without, and everywhere else, the unreachable that reaches everywhere. The nonmaterial reality would include all collaborations, oppositions, and combinations. It could not be located in time, either, as all times at once: past, potential, and current ephemeral. It simply *is*, every possible shape and perfect fluidity. The nonmaterial reality would be beyond conditioning formulations of good and bad. It is the unabridged reality, us and beyond us, ever-changing and changeless, unfettered freedom and complete rule, the multiplicity of all perspectives and confluence, unity in diversity. It would be the Reason that lies beyond and subsumes our reason. In the context of writing, we could consider the nonmaterial reality to be Every Story, the Perfect Poem, that which underwrites writing – and which remains resolutely inaccessible except by figurative language and the arts more broadly.

Poet Philip Larkin speaks of creative writing when he describes the project of living as

a unique endeavour
To bring to bloom the million-petalled flower
Of being here. (196)

Creative writing might nurture the interface the nonmaterial reality as follows. A writer becomes aware of the tug of an inchoate something which invites intuitive pursuit. In states of reflection, she follows the tug, sometimes putting words down as she goes. After roughly locating this pressing and wordless area in the realm of nonmaterial reality, the writer feels for its contours and dynamics. These arrive as images, moments of lives and existences closely yoked to a range of feelings. The visions and energies elicited are both affectively challenging and amenable to uptake. They are deeply personal impersonal phenomena. The images are available to articulation and interpretation into elements of figurative language and writing craft. The verbal artefact which assembles represents just one of the

limitless facets of the reality. The evolving interpretation, inevitably, draws imperfectly and incompletely on the qualities and scale of the nonmaterial reality. The writer persists in the effort to sustain contact with the reality and to draw on it as fully and faithfully as she is able. To the degree that she succeeds, the poem comes to life. Poet Emily Dickinson nominates this cosmic interface as the defining and distinguishing characteristic of creative writing: “When I physically feel the top of my head coming off, that is poetry.” (Johnson, 474) With the barrier between them detached, mind and universe merge.

Nonetheless, returning from the rarefied atmosphere of the far reaches of creative writing, the writer finds her ignorance preserved. Outside of the written work, the writer remains screened from access to the larger nonmaterial reality. Writer is conferred no esoteric knowledge or privilege. It is the written work, conversely, which exhibits durability and resilience and continues to embody undiminishing life. The work becomes point of reference and orientation, point of departure for further exploration by writer and reader. As poet Wallace Stevens explains, “Poetry is a search for the inexplicable.” (198) This inexplicable is the constant and bracing truth that exists on its own terms. By definition and design it cannot be procured. Though we seek through it indefatigably and continuously, creative writing brings no reward other than itself. The impracticality of creative writing is its integrity and beneficence. It can be bent to no will or implementation.

It may be worth suggesting that nonmaterial reality incorporates material reality, as it encompasses everything. The physical reality – from natural surroundings to material possessions, social interactions, etc. – represents a subset and embedded expression of the nonmaterial. “The first and most obvious characteristic of fiction,” O’Connor observes, “is that it deals with reality through what can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted, and touched.” (524) The nonmaterial context conditions the material instantiation. Works of creative writing incarnate in the material world. They take on physicality, sounds or shapes. Nonmaterial lives in works of creative writing set the parameters and model alternatives for material lives in the physical world. Interpreted in and as

readers, they exert underlying influence on the manifest world. Humans inveterately and unrestrainedly engage in interface with the comprehensive nonmaterial reality through creative language use. The nonmaterial is our sponsoring and generating platform without which there could be no material.

Release

An interface with nonmaterial reality potentially describes not only creative writing, but any of the arts – music, painting, sculpture, dance, etc. – humanities more generally, and the full spectrum of liberal arts. All of these areas of inquiry arrogate intrinsic meaning as exploration of the full dimensions of the environment which we inhabit. No other activity could be as vital and central to our lives than this exploration. The overall conception of creative writing suggested in this article is offered in the hope and possibility that it could be a source of reassurance, encouragement, and stimulation for those who engage in creative reading and writing. Every writer surely experiences the writing process in a different way, but there are likely to be shared dimensions, as well. The conception outlined here is intended as a contribution to the ongoing contemporary discussion and interchange on the nature of writing. While informed by experience and practice, the ideas in the article remain purely speculative. The second installment of this article will consider more closely several of the component dimensions of creative writing craft – fulfillments of form, music of language, radical nature of images, thinking through feeling, subjectivity and subjectivities, and time enrichment among them – as the working conductors to any nonmaterial reality.

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