

## **“Poetry makes nothing happen”: Creative writing and the English classroom**

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*ABSTRACT: This paper examines the processes of creative writing, exploring in particular how intuition and analysis, unconscious and conscious, work together, and how the social and the personal are involved in these processes. The author discusses her experience of writing a sustained narrative poem with lyrical elements, and then as a teacher-educator discusses the implications for our understanding of the creative processes and classroom practice. Following the work of Csikszentmihalyi and colleagues (1994, 1996), the paper traces how not only personal but also social, cultural and disciplinary factors are at play in the development of the work. The first of these is the domain of knowledge and practice that has preceded the creative writer and must be mastered before s/he is in a position to innovate on the established norms. Next comes the “problematic” or dissonance, which arouses the psychic energy that engages both the conscious, analytical activities of the mind and its intuitive, even unconscious sphere. (Intuition is taken to refer to those more diffuse mental activities that are a-logical, non-analytical, associative, aesthetic and metaphoric.) As the work develops, the various processes are described and shown to be recursive: incubation (during which ideas churn around below the threshold of consciousness), insight (the “eureka” moment, when the pieces of the puzzle fall together), followed by evaluation of the idea (for its appropriateness and elegance, given the problematics) and the elaboration of the idea into a more fully worked out poem. After drafting, the field of experts is engaged – those who act as gatekeepers to determine whether the creative idea, product or process will be accepted into the domain. The paper concludes by arguing for the value of creative writing in English classrooms.*

*KEYWORDS: creative writing, poetry, English teaching, writing processes.*

### **INTRODUCTION: RE-EXAMINING PROCESSES IN “THE WRITING PROCESS”**

*“There’s nothing to writing: all you do is sit down at the typewriter and open a vein.” (Red Smith, American sportswriter)*

These days the term “writing” is used to cover a range of forms and media far wider than the process writing advocates of the 1980s imagined. And the term “creative” has also undergone revision: even when it’s not associated with “industries”, as it is at my university, we recognize that it can’t be fenced off in an elevated paddock near where the Muses live, a long way from more everyday activities such as dreaming, telling gossipy anecdotes, writing reports or crafting spin-doctored media releases. But let’s agree we

know what the term “creative writing” means in subject English: students making aesthetic, imaginative texts, often in written form.

I’m assuming that creative writing is still a valuable ingredient in English curricula at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. That’s why I want to reconsider the writing processes themselves. In particular, I want to re-examine how intuition and analysis, unconscious and conscious, work together, and how the social and the personal are involved in these processes.

There are several reasons why it’s useful to examine the processes of writing for English classrooms. First, contemporary critical, poststructuralist and genre theories have so emphasized the socio-cultural constructedness of texts and meanings that the individual and the creativity of his or her textual constructions have all but vanished as meaningful concepts. And insofar as contemporary theory has infused our syllabuses, they’re the less able to appreciate and allow for the individual and the creative. We certainly need to understand how what is personally experienced and expressed is also conditioned by aspects of our cultural context, including language. But we need also to go beyond truisms about those shaping contexts, to see how cultural products are also shaped by individuals, and how something of the personal remains, ineluctably, in these products.

Second, even when creative writing has been practised in English classrooms, it has very often been made subservient to reading, taking the form of “dependent authorship” or “transformation” of texts, often with an explicitly stated critical agenda. The point of such exercises is not the writing itself, but the understandings about the “base” text which this activity makes the more apparent. While such exercises may still permit the imagination to wander, its path is often pretty narrowly specified, and the problematic – these days usually a matter of politics or form – is generally determined by the teacher. This is not to deny that such activities may be valuable for students, in fostering their understanding of some of the processes of composition and the crafting involved in the making of both base text and dependent text. But these tasks allow little scope for invention outside their pre-specified conditions.

Third, in syllabi, teaching practice and assessment regimes, an impoverished version of “the writing process” has hardened into ritual. This entails one or more drafts, feedback on each, revision and editing, and “publication” of the “finished” product – often only in folios for the teacher’s judgmental eyes. As I hope to demonstrate, this orthodoxy can’t do justice to the complexity of the processes that are actually involved. It concentrates on an aspect that’s easier to manage in an English classroom: responding to drafts is familiar terrain for teachers, and the activity is reassuringly public, analytical, disciplinary and routine. But, as we shall see, it underplays other, more intuitive, creative elements in the development of a piece of writing that are harder to foster in classroom environments, and often can’t be taught directly. Both aspects are needed in partnership.

I’m a poet as well as an educator of pre-service English education students. In this paper I’m going to draw on both these selves as I consider the various processes and stages involved in creative writing. For each I’ll first describe what went on as I was writing a

long (600+ line) narrative poem with lyrical elements, called “Souvenirs”<sup>1</sup>. (I kept a journal during this writing, in which I recorded the processes of its development.) Then at each point, as an educator I’ll discuss what this implies for our understanding of these creative processes and for classroom practice. I’ll use indentation to differentiate these selves and voices.

But first, I need to define some of the terms I’ll be using for key concepts. First, the **problematic** or **dissonance**, with which the creative processes begin.

The creative process starts with a sense that there is a puzzle somewhere, or a task to be accomplished. Perhaps something is not right, somewhere there is a conflict, a tension, a need to be satisfied. The problematic issue can be triggered by a personal experience, by a lack of fit in the symbolic system, by the stimulation of colleagues, or by public needs. In any case, without such a felt tension that attracts the psychic energy of the person, there is no need for a new response (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 95).

I would add that a dissonance need not occur only at the outset, as an initiating, driving force, but can make itself felt at any time in the process, whenever one senses that something isn’t right in the work. I should note that, in my view, the strict notion of a problematic may well apply more characteristically in the sciences than in the arts. Certainly a problematic may arise for an artist (as it did in my case) – but at other times it may be not so much a dissonance as a sense of possibility – *What if...? Or Aha! I could play around with that...*

This “psychic energy” can engage both the conscious, deliberative, rational and analytical activities of the mind and its intuitive, even unconscious sphere. I’ll often refer to the latter as the “**undermind**”.<sup>2</sup> Whether we call it **intuition** or the **unconscious**, this refers to those more diffuse mental activities that are a-logical, non-analytical, associative, intuitive, aesthetic and metaphoric. The undermind has some peculiar characteristics. As Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi and Gardner note (1994, p. 35),

the key quality of unconscious thought ... is that it seems to take liberties with whatever goes into it and whatever comes out of it. It seems to have little regard for “reality” or for the normal rules of thought or communication, and seems to operate with its own set of rules.... In general ... we believe that unconscious thought is motivated by a natural desire to transform, to change, to make things different from the way they were. It is a process that has certain tendencies to destabilize structures, to break them down and render them less organized.

Following the work of cognitive psychologists, Csikszentmihalyi (1996) also notes that “ideas, when deprived of conscious direction, follow simple rules of association” (p. 101), free from the conscious mind’s censoring. Moreover,

<sup>1</sup> The poem is published in Morgan (2006).

<sup>2</sup> I like this term of Guy Claxton’s (1997), since it avoids Freudian associations of the unconscious with the subconscious. Claxton defines the “undermind” as “the intelligent [or “cognitive”] unconscious” – a more intuitive mode of mind which is less busy, purposeful and problem-solving than what he calls “d-mode”, which is characterized by conscious deliberation and logical thinking.

when we think consciously about an issue, our previous training and the effort to arrive at a solution push our ideas in a linear direction, usually along predictable or familiar lines. But intentionality does not work in the subconscious. Free from rational direction, ideas can combine and pursue each other every which way. Because of this freedom, original connections that would be at first rejected by the rational mind have a chance to become established (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 102).

As is clear from the work of researchers like Csikszentmihalyi and others such as Claxton or Andreasen (2005), who report on recent developments in cognitive science based on experimental studies into brain functioning, the undermind is at work in similar ways amongst creative people across a range of domains, from science, technology and mathematics to the arts and crafts, and even to interpersonal relations – though it will manifest itself differently in each domain, and perhaps to different degrees.

I’ve dwelt on this concept at some length, because the work of the undermind is often misunderstood and undervalued in English teaching. But if we accept this description of its workings, it should affect our classroom strategies and reasons for choosing them.

The older, “classic” literature on creative processes identified a number of components or “stages” (Amabile, 1990). These are *preparation* (“becoming immersed, consciously or not, in a set of problematic issues that are interesting and arouse curiosity”), *incubation* (“during which ideas churn around below the threshold of consciousness” – that is, in the undermind), *insight* (“the ‘Aha!’ moment...when the pieces of the puzzle fall together”), followed by *evaluation* of the “eureka” idea (for its practicability, its “fit” with the problematics, its elegance and the like) and the *elaboration* of the idea into a more fully worked out theory, plan or product (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, pp. 79-80). This theory is found wanting today, for two reasons: it misrepresents a complex, recursive process as a single, linear set of stages; and it focuses on the individual and underplays the influence of the domain of the endeavour and the field of expertise.

These concepts of the domain and the field in addition to the person are the contribution of Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Gardner (1994), based on their large-scale empirical research into creative individuals across a range of areas. They argue that we can’t explain creativity by focusing just on individuals’ processes; it also involves social, cultural and disciplinary contexts. If a person is to be creative, they must first be steeped in the *domain* of knowledge and practice that has preceded them and have mastered its constituent knowledge. Only then will they be in a position to innovate on what’s been established in the domain. And after creation their products must be accepted by the *field* of experts, who act as gatekeepers to determine whether the creative idea, product or process will be accepted into the domain.

In what follows, I’ll try to show how the domain and the field work together with those more personal aspects of the creative processes in working out the problematic.

## WRITING PROCESSES: “ONE ‘HAVING’ A POEM”<sup>3</sup>

### Contexts and problematics

#### Dissonance

A friend, E., calls one evening from Tasmania, to tell me she’s got colon cancer, and is to be operated on in a couple of weeks. She won’t know until after the operation whether the cancer has already spread to other parts. This news comes only a couple of weeks after another dear friend has told me he’s decided to move from Brisbane to Sydney to live. Change, and potential loss. Within two weeks I fly to Tasmania, to see E. before her operation and tour and bushwalk with friends. The places we visit are new to me, and I take to them the burden of my griefs and fears of loss. These are the immediate events that propel me into writing.

“The time is out of joint.” In this case, the immediate, catalytic felt tension was a bevy of feelings and thoughts. These had no “solution” or resolution that could be reached by logical thinking; they simply had to be lived with. Fears and perplexities of this kind stir up deep sediments. Of course, not all problematics, even in the writing of poetry, need be of this kind. Some may be more of the nature of a puzzle, such as how one can develop an idea within the disciplinary confines of a particular stanzaic form and metrical scheme. But to sustain the writing of so long a poem, it may be that the impetus needs to involve a problematic with this intensity of emotional charge.

How do teachers and students identify a problematic that will offer the necessary “felt tension”? We teachers are rightly chary these days of inviting students to use creative writing as a confessional – and of course, most students are also reluctant to confide in their teachers as “Dear diary”. Too often, instead, the problematic has been either narrowly defined by the teacher as a matter of form (write a haiku on Easter; turn this news report into a ballad) or left entirely open (write a short story for your folio).

It would be good if there were room within an English program for students to be helped to look for the puzzle, conflict, tension, need or problem – in themselves, in their contexts, in what they’re reading – that provides a *felt* tension. And then, to be allowed space and time to explore this, in a not too narrowly directed way. But classrooms are busy places that aren’t very congenial to such introspective exploration. Often, then, teachers will take steps to kick-start students’ inventiveness. For instance, one way in which an artificial dissonance can be created is to draw up three columns on a page or board. In the first (the “Yes” column) a list of words (on the same topic) is brainstormed that are positive (for our purposes, it might be “intuition”). In the third (the “No column) a similar list of words is generated with negative connotations (for example, “institution”). The middle column is PO, short for possibilities (could “parody” be a way of being creative within a bureaucracy?). This kind of problem-solving is the first stage, which is then complicated by inventing a setting, two or three people and a couple of

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<sup>3</sup> This was the title of a talk given, paradoxically, by the psychologist B.F. Skinner, whose name we associate with that most extreme form of behaviourism. The title nicely suggests that the development of a poem involves processes of gestation rather like those of childbearing.

events, to create a story in which the shift occurs from the negative to positive pole (or vice versa) via the possibility.

### The domain

I’m deeply dissatisfied with the poems I’ve been writing in recent months. They’re too clever and too rigid in form. They seem to come only from my conscious, deliberate mind. Many of the poems I’ve been reading lately disappoint me too, for the same reason. And the other kinds of poems I read, postmodern poetry, are equally unsatisfying, but for the opposite reason. They set phrases and images together in ways that are improbably associative and a-logical – and don’t give me enough commonsense meaning. They often seem undisciplined, even by their own norms, and self-indulgent. I want to be more expansive, at times loosely conversational, I want to work more with a developing narrative line.

Just recently I’ve come across Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of red* (1998) and “The Glass Essay” in her *Glass, irony and God* (1992). “I have much to learn from Carson,” I note in my journal. “In her I sense a kind of truth to her vision rather than a preference for the tidy line, the lyric effect. *This* is one of the things I need to learn from her. And not to be safe, not to be decorative, not to stay safely within the bars of the poem-cage. In lesser hands, some of her images could seem too stark, too dramatic, even over-rhetorical, to the point of melodrama. I must study these, to see how she does it.” Carson’s work helps me imagine writing something that goes beyond what I’ve already done: how to write at length, weaving together a number of scenes and images, thematic and symbolic threads, and how to hear a tone of voice that’s sometimes elliptical, sometimes more discursive. But always with a sense of directness that’s so different from the self-conscious abstract play of the postmodernists.

This is an example of a characteristic domain-related dissonance. My dissatisfaction with the poetry I was reading and writing is a source of felt tension, and predisposes me to attempt something new in form and voice. Problematics in the domain can be of various kinds in creative writing. They may have to do with subject matter (what is usually represented, and how), with aspects of the structuring (how far a particular form may be pushed, until it breaks open into something else, for instance), with genre (including the hybridizing of one with another) – and so on. Such domain-related dissonance moves the writer towards novelty – towards variation on the normative patterns, or at least on the patterns the particular artist has established.

Now I might not have found a way out of my “cage” had Carson’s poetry not provided me with an opening beyond its bars. This intertextual connection was not so much one of substance as of form and voice. (In the end, however, my poem is nothing like Carson’s work: voice, stance, patterns of image and movements of thought, rhythms and line breaks – all these are characteristically mine.) Nor was it about the close imitation of a model. Rather it offered a broader, more enabling opportunity, which was available to me when the more particular catalytic events catapulted me into writing. All writers owe an enormous debt to their reading (and listening and viewing) within and beyond their particular genre, and draw on it in their writing. Such intertextuality ranges from the unconscious echo, to the hardly perceptible gesture towards another text, to the

conscious, deliberate homage or borrowing. In a real sense, we could not write if we had not read.

This suggests that in the classroom students should be given opportunities to steep themselves in a range of imaginative texts, including film and other visual texts. And then be given opportunity to draw on these texts. Sometimes they may be undertaking "slavish" imitation, and at other times, they may be creating collages of text-fragments, or warping the given text in a parody. And in these acts of homage, they may see where there are limitations in the base text they want to go beyond, where there are opportunities for them to improvise on a melody or innovate more radically.

### Situation

Journal entry: How important a vacation is – when the demands of work have vacated my mind! Free to loaf, present in the moment, I can be alertly receptive to ideas, images, phrases, can explore where these lead, in a musing, relaxed way, without irritably reaching for "answers" and outcomes. And those warm-up writing exercises I've been doing regularly – these too have made me ready.

Such "musing" can at times enable one to tune in to the Muse. In this entry, I've alluded to the poet John Keats, who wrote in a letter to his brothers of what he called negative capability, "that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritably reaching after fact and reason" (see Bate, 1956, p. 249). It's very much like what Claxton (1997) calls "slow thinking", that ruminative state when the uppermind (the conscious, deliberative mind) allows ideas to percolate up from the undermind.

Regrettably, classrooms are uniformly hostile to such loafing, which can perhaps occur properly only out of school. Is it possible create the classroom conditions conducive to the undermind with its more diffuse mental activities that are non-analytical, associative and metaphoric? I'd be loath to think that a new writing orthodoxy might come into being with rituals designed to herd students into such "slow thinking". Still, teachers might be able to prepare students indirectly for such states of mind, by now and then encouraging various forms of associative play with images and words and sounds, play that is "free" of "irritably reaching after" certain, "right" answers and outcomes.

### **A poem emerges: Insight, incubation, generation**

Journal notes: After phone conversation this evening with E. about her cancer, to bed. Woken several times during the night with an imperious demand to write down an image, a phrase. *Patrolling the garden for elm-tree suckers, resurgent, metastatic.... Amoebic fingers of foam on the beach.* In the morning, fragments of our talk bobbed into mind. Wrote them down too. Wondered how to make them into a poem. Then remembered a conversation I'd had with M., that one way to avoid oversimplifying complexities was to not tell a single story, and not to resolve it. To let the fragments stand, juxtaposed in all their particularity. Not tidied up. And so it will be with this poem. That way, I don't have to try to get my mind around the whole – to compose it as a whole, to have it all beautifully in perspective from the one viewpoint. (Impossible, and a betrayal of E.) So

the dis-composing nature of the news is carried into the form of the poem: I’m not saying I’ve got “the” answer, that I’ve encompassed the event in a coherent response.

Two things are interesting here. One: it seems that the “head of steam” built up in the undermind by those catalytic events was so urgent that it could penetrate my consciousness – even through sleep. Note that the phrases are already that – words; but they also contain images, metaphors. In my experience, the intelligent unconscious can cast up on the shore of one’s consciousness “pure” visual images not couched in words, or words alone, with or without an image attached or embedded in the words. The second point worth noting is that already at this stage, when the poem is only beginning to emerge, I’m already musing on a possible structure and patterning (here the permission I’ve derived from Carson is evident) – although the shape of the whole is as yet unimaginable. It is sometimes the case with other poems I write that a sense of form (a pattern of images or phrases, or a shape and direction of the poem as a whole) is key to the original idea; at other times in drafting I follow my nose through a thought or idea or image, and only much later do I find what shape the poem needs to take, to present that idea appropriately. Either way works; which precedes may depend on the nature of the insight.

Many teachers give students a form to write in. This is particularly the case with poetry in the junior grades, though of course the whole genre movement is predicated on such a procedure. Such structures can be useful, especially when students have little experience of the range of poetic forms from which to choose, or when they’re overwhelmed by having too much crowding into view that clamours to be written about. Then narrowing the aperture, through the discipline of form, can be enabling. However, when the demand to fill an empty form dominates the initial process, valuable insights, images, notions and expressions may never emerge. There should also be scope for writers to take rambling excursions over and under an idea without too early being required to rein in their words. Then, in conference, young writers can be helped to see what form may be latent in those words on the page, or may be brought in as a possible way of making the writing shapely.

Tasmania. Visiting E., walking over mountains, along beaches, driving through forest and towns – each day images, phrases, events, ideas, memories, percolate into consciousness. Almost all I see and hear takes becomes significant as material for the poem. I remain open to the dim flickerings of images and feelings and phrases on the periphery of my mind’s eye, without impatiently seeking to pin them down prematurely. I don’t try to force bits of the poem to arrive fully fledged into the light. And so the scribbles grow. Some sections begin to take provisional form. I begin to sense the components and their emphases, begin to hear the voices. By the end of my trip, I’ve got more than ten pages of lines, stanzas, phrases.

These days the idea of a poet being “possessed” seems too romantic for words. Nonetheless, writers will talk of being taken over by their characters, or haunted by a poem they’re composing. Of course we still remember to buy the bread and phone our mothers (or sons). It’s rather like a tune you can’t get out of your head: phrases resonate, sometimes submerged, sometimes drowning out other thoughts. Here it’s a tune you’re



composing, often over an extended period (even if it’s a short poem), and this entails a sustained, if not continuous, attentiveness, which is a kind of commitment.

English curricula emphasise range in the writing students are to undertake. Teachers and systems want evidence of students’ productivity across genres and contexts. And so the pressure is on for students to demonstrate their competence now in this text type, now in that, moving relentlessly on to the next due date. Certainly at times it can be useful for writers to be under pressure – it can catapult them into completing a piece of work. The risk is of bringing that piece to premature closure. It would be good if teachers could sometimes give students the scope to dwell in a piece of writing over a period of time, to return to it and play with it now and then, free of a looming deadline. Or to pick out a piece from their folios and read it afresh, as a reader not writer – and perhaps to see what the piece now needs. (All the poets I know do this: after working on a poem they will often lay it aside for weeks, months or years; only the distance of time enables them to make often radical changes.)

Playing around with words can be generative, not just developmental. Here’s one form such play can take: rapid writing.

I need to explore a part of the poem I don’t yet clearly see. So I do some “rapid writing” or “free writing”, keeping my hand moving over the page, forming words without censoring my thoughts or consciously crafting and evaluating phrases. It’s a kind of stream-of-consciousness writing. I tap into feelings and emotions rather than thoughts, I dwell in the particulars of a situation or episode and explore these in a freely associative way, to let images, patterns and connections, words and phrases emerge unbidden. Sometimes, during long stretches of motorway driving, I “free speak” into a tape recorder. (When I play it back later, in the background is the swish of windscreen wipers, the wail of an ambulance siren.) From this writing and speaking I harvest images, phrases, associations: the raw material that I can then work on with more deliberate craft.

It’s the very fluency of this writing – the imperative to keep writing at a pace that exceeds the capacity of deliberate thinking to review and control – that enables one to evade conceptual thinking and so tap into the resources of the undermind that one couldn’t otherwise get at. It can be necessary to keep what I call the “monkey mind” occupied so that the undermind can continue its ruminating. Taking a walk, swimming, driving the car: these are the times when ideas, images, solutions to problems will pop unbidden into mind. (Csikszentmihalyi (1996), p. 138, notes the same phenomenon.)

“Workshop” books on writing poetry (for example, Behn and Twichell, 1992; Goldberg, 1986; Kowitt, 1995) often present a variety of exercises and topics designed to open the door to the undermind. Many of these (some for groups) can be adapted for the classroom. They may not produce gems – that’s not the only point – but they can be fun, and over time they can have the effect of lubricating the creaky hinges on that door. Other activities beyond writing can do similar work, such as visualizing (in the mind or on paper or manipulating materials and images), or extemporizing role-plays and the like. Such exercises can be used in the initial stages, as part of the preparation and incubation that can generate insights and materials to work on.

**Elaboration and evaluation: Undermind proposes, uppermind disposes**

It’s one of the peculiar problematics of imaginative writing that its materials are words, their meanings worn so smooth in so many mouths. Our minds often trundle along well-worn tracks, carrying workaday thoughts dressed in grey pinstriped language. Conscious thought and the language that’s integral to it work mostly in the realm of logic and deliberation, pressing towards the conclusiveness of a single coherent meaning.<sup>4</sup> As Claxton (1977, p. 156) notes, “It may well be harder – as many creative people have argued – to be original in propositions than in intuitions, or to unearth and question cultural assumptions that are embodied in the very way the wordscape is constructed.”

This problematic is also the challenge poets delight in: to make new patterns, new associations, new forms and meanings out of the thread-bare materials of language. In this the undermind is a crucial partner to the uppermind.

The undermind isn’t a realm of sublime inspiration that’s always aesthetically impeccable. It offers material that’s exuberant, richly associative, far-fetched, non-rational, even excessive; that’s precisely its function and value. But in creating an aesthetic text, we move between the intuitive and the deliberative, between inner world and social world. For instance, the outer world provides my undermind with materials (my sensory experiences of my world’s objects, with all their particularity and their encoded meanings). And the undermind performs its alchemy with these. The conscious mind can propose a problem for the undermind to work on, and so can to a limited degree direct its attention. And the conscious mind evaluates and crafts what intuition offers. Some poets are content to use the materials thrown up by the undermind in pretty much their raw state, in order to evade the conscious mind’s censorship. Others – and I’m among these – will take respectfully and appreciatively what the undermind offers, and then evaluate it, work on it, shape it – even jettison bits. Now the play of the undermind is fundamentally creative (though, as we know from the symbols our dreams throw up, it can also thereby evaluate by offering alternative versions of our daytime realities), but we can’t say that the work of crafting undertaken by the uppermind is exclusively critical. That is, crafting is itself also creative: it involves making through (re)shaping.

Let me give some instances from my writing of the work of this partnership between undermind and uppermind.

Journal entry: One stanza incomplete: don’t know yet what it needs. Leave it blank. Read it before bed. Assign the problem to the undermind, trusting that an idea will emerge in its own time. First thing in the morning, in a still-dreamy state: the “solution” pops into mind.

There’s often a fluid interchange between the critical/evaluative and the creative/intuitive. As Csikszentmihalyi (1996) notes, “A person who makes a creative

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<sup>4</sup> As Claxton (1997) notes: “The trains of thought that may be stimulated in the wordscape are also likely to be more rigid, more stereotypical and more defined by the conventions of the linguistic culture at large, than the patterns of the brainscape.” The “brainscape” is the set of neural networks and their clustering into concepts, which are more experientially based than the “wordscape” of linguistic labels that overlays the brainscape (p. 156).

contribution never just slogs through the long last stage of elaboration. This part of the process is constantly interrupted by periods of incubation and is punctuated by small epiphanies. Many fresh insights emerge as one is presumably just putting finishing touches on the initial insight” (p. 80). So it was in this instance:

I re-assemble the segments, shifting their order, relocating bits from elsewhere in the poem. Sometimes I’m deliberate about this structuring, at other times I’m working more by feel, sensing that this works well alongside that, there’s an echo here that picks up an image or motif there. For example, at the end of a sequence in which the particulars of conversations, memories and events suggest in various ways the impermanence of our lives, I add

I think now of sitting in a dark car.  
Approaching headlights strafe the cabin  
with odd-angled, shifting shapes  
illuminating, blinding. Gone.

At the time I don’t know why I put this image there. It just “comes to me”, and I trust that the hovering meaning is enough – more powerful, perhaps, because I’ve not spelled it out in the poem or in my mind. It’s only much later that I see a link with an earlier section when the narrator’s shut in the utter dark of the isolation cell at Port Arthur, and with other suggestions of being blinded. Of course, I still have to judge if it works there – or at all.

Sometimes the creative and the critical were at work simultaneously:

Even as a line or phrase comes to me, I’m assessing it and crafting it. When I’m revising, a single image or phrase sometimes pops into mind as an alternative to a line I’ve previously identified as not quite right. This often occurs when I’m away from the page but consciously or semi-consciously rehearsing a line, turning it over in my mind and on my tongue.

My long apprenticeship in poetry – both reading and writing – has enabled me to internalize many of the ways in which poems can create their effects at the level of word and phrase and line, and also to develop a feel for the movements of a poem’s structuring. In an experienced poet, some processes of crafting may be so speedily or automatically accomplished that even to the writer they leave no trace of conscious deliberation. Thus crafting becomes intuitive.

Often, however, the planing and sanding were primarily conscious and deliberative.

Now that I’m well into the revising stage, I’m doing a different kind of work. I’m listening for patterns of sound and rhythm and emphasis, and tinkering to improve them. I’m attending to the associative auras of words, sometimes substituting different ones that cast a new glow over their environs. I’m feeling the momentum of a sentence and where its weight falls, and maybe changing the syntax for better effect.

And I’m musing over the larger structures: weighing the heft of this section against that, tracing the symphonic shifts from one motif to another, listening for the reappearance of

a theme to balance its earlier appearance, evaluating how well a new element works at a particular point to provide the energy of surprise. And making changes to the sequence here and there.

It’s hard to exemplify this long labour, that often seems minute and fiddlesome to an onlooker. A couple of examples will have to do. One: remember that initial dream-message phrase: “Patrolling the garden for elm-tree suckers, resurgent, metastatic....” When I came to describe my visit to E., I wrote,

She shows me the guest room  
being built behind her house,  
gestures round the rubble  
where a path will wind  
under the walnut tree.

In the first draft I’d added

*A garden is an act of faith*  
I say feebly.

That “feebly” was indeed feeble. I changed the narrator’s words, to make them more conversational in tone and rhythm:

– *A garden’s always an act of faith*, I say,

and then (*aha!*) added that phrase, floating free in my notes, editing it to

thinking of elm-tree suckers in my yard.

“Resurgent” and “metastatic” had to go: they were too similar in meaning, too pompous in tone and too heavy-handed in gesturing towards an association and a significance. I decided to trust my reader to infer that meaning if she would, letting “suckers” suggest the unwanted spread of an organism. (The underminer doesn’t always have impeccable taste or subtlety.)

A second instance involves adding rather than cutting. The first draft of the poem began,

Evening phone call. Zoe.  
I watch my reflective ghost  
gesturing and grimacing  
in the window.  
– Penny, she says: *I’ve got*

*cancer.*  
My heart lurches  
punches me in the gut  
winds me.

It then went on to report Zoe’s conversation in indirect speech. Now while the rhythms and line breaks of the second stanza convey shock, a friend who read an early draft commented that the narrator’s watching herself was rather self-regarding, and her silence left too much for the reader to infer. Those first lines now read:

Evening phone call. Zoe.  
 My reflective ghost smiles and gestures  
 in the window.  
 – Penny, she says, *I’ve got  
 cancer.*  
 – Zoe. *No.*  
 My heart lurches,  
 punches me in the gut,  
 winds me. I gasp  
 out words: *sorry, shock, terrible, how bad, you OK?*

This is more direct, and dramatizes the feelings further, while maintaining those jerky rhythms. Towards the end of the section I had originally written,

A monsoonal storm crashes onto the roof.  
 In the strobe lightning  
 her words are slippery  
 with the dark of blood;

and now I add

mine are flickering neon: *hope, well,  
 better, trust, love.*

These echo those earlier stutterings, but now serve up uncertain hope and reassurance.

Perhaps it may help – if it’s not daunting – for students to know that professional writers, who make their finished product look so simple and artless, often take their work through countless sometimes radical revisions, in which characters change, episodes arrive or depart, points of view and focus are radically modified – and so on. Annie Proulx offers a recent instance: she tells of how her short story, “Brokeback Mountain”, underwent more than 60 drafts (Proulx, McMurty and Ossana, 2005).

Only those who are serious about their writing are likely to persist with the pains-taking, patient work of planing and sanding. They may be few in any ordinary classroom. But it may be useful for those few, and perhaps others, to learn a few key things about crafting. Perhaps the first is that crafting involves more than editing (narrowly understood as sub-editing, producing a “fair copy” with no errors of spelling, punctuation and the like). That is, the work needs to be seen as still provisional, still open to rethinking and radical re-development – even as the crafting moves towards realizing its ultimate form and “argument”. Such crafting involves work at different levels, from the merest detail to broad structuring. (Younger writers can often become focused only at the level below the sentence.) This work is of different kinds: it may entail cutting the words or details that

have just come along for the ride; choosing more precise, fresh or appropriate words and phrases; or adding elements that will clarify or give needed emphasis. It may mean listening for the rhythms of phrasing or the patterns of assonance that have the right momentum and weight (in prose no less than poetry). It could mean shifting whole blocks of text around, to change the emotional emphases or narrative momentum and the like. In all this, intuition continues to play its part, though usually directed more by a more deliberate, analytic, aesthetic sense.

Most teachers know better than to attempt to get their students to do all this at once, on the same piece. Not that crafting should be taught in incremental, lock-step fashion, from detail to larger structures or the reverse: more experienced writers know how we shuttle between levels, and how change of one kind entails other changes. But a selective focus can be a sensible way to teach the various aspects of crafting over time. And of course, it should be clear that not all pieces must undergo the same exhaustive processes.

How is it to be done? At times the teacher’s demonstration on a sample piece can be useful, though it is sometimes of limited value unless it is sufficiently close to the pieces the students are working on, so that they can readily extrapolate and apply what’s being modelled. Ideally (and I know classrooms are less than ideal places for composition), these things are best learned in a workshop situation, or one-on-one, where an experienced reader responds to the draft, helping the writer identify what needs development, coaching and – where appropriate – suggesting ways of crafting the text. This means encouraging the writer to decentre, to step out of the writer’s shoes and into the reader’s.

And so to the field of readers.

## **AFTER DRAFTING: ENGAGING WITH THE FIELD**

“The creative individual must reject the wisdom of the field, yet she must also incorporate its standards into a strict self-criticism. And for this one must learn to achieve the dialectical tension between involvement and detachment that is so characteristic of every creative process,” notes Csikszentmihalyi (1996, p. 248).

As a writer, I’m also my own first reader. But now that the first developed draft is nearly ready, I’m beginning to yearn for another reader – a competent reader, experienced with this kind of poem, who’ll desire the pleasures it offers and will be prepared to appreciate and understand it. Have I said enough for this reader, but have I also let her make the connections and complete the inferences, without insisting she take *my* meaning? As well as this reader I’m also yearning for a friendly, scrupulously critical reader-editor who’ll be quick to point out where the writing’s over the top, where I didn’t recognize clichés, where I haven’t made sense.

I’m going to ask certain members of my poetry workshop group to give me feedback. They’re familiar with the terrain of contemporary lyric/narrative poetry that this poem stands on. They know my work, so they understand what I’m capable of and what criticism will be most useful. And I can trust them not to be merely polite, and not to

overwhelm me with criticisms or suggestions I’m incapable of following. Of course, I know they’ll also read through the lens of their own desires and preferences as readers and their styles as writers.

Experienced writers have already internalized the eye and ear of their intended reader-audience: it contributes, paradoxically, to their sense of assurance. Even as they’re drafting and crafting, they read and listen to the developing work as that reader would – evaluating the text in the light of that anticipated response, but not capitulating slavishly to what “the market” may want. Internalising the standards of the field has also meant much reading, over time – sometimes immersing oneself in others’ work, giving oneself up to it, sometimes scrutinizing it closely to understand its workings. In the end, however influential the standards of the field, the internalized critique or feedback from others, it’s the writer’s own judgment that should prevail. Some writers are keener than others to create a “crowd-pleaser” – but to varying degrees all will know that movement between the involvement and detachment Csikszentmihalyi mentions.

Young writers are less likely to have developed that detachment, and this is where tactful intervention by the teacher is crucial: tactful, because it shouldn’t overwhelm the student with either the impersonal authority of elders-and-betters or impose the teacher’s personal authority and taste. The teacher needs to draw on her pedagogical judgment, to determine what feedback on what aspects of the piece will be most helpful at this stage of the work’s and the writer’s development. At times, it might mean the teacher simply suggests reading a particular poem or story that suggests a way of dealing with the problematic aspect of the draft.

When I took my first oil painting course, the teacher introduced me to a very important concept: the “necessary failure”. That is, sometimes we can only see what we need to do in the next (not yet begun) painting by identifying what dissatisfied us in the present one (as well as what we like, of course). This dissonance is what enables the “break-through”. The implication of this is that writers, like other artists, will conceive of their work as an ongoing series, rather than a single, perfected piece, and think of themselves as always practising for what they haven’t yet done and perhaps can’t yet do. We look backwards in order to write forwards.

I hope this might be the case too for at least some writers in classrooms.

### **REVALUING PROCESS IN “THE WRITING PROCESS”**

From time to time I sit in classrooms observing my pre-service education students attempting to teach, and watching bored, restless, alienated kids acting up. So I’m all too aware that the suggestions I’ve made about creative writing in English are counsel of perfection. There will always be some school students who for one reason or another can’t risk exposing themselves in such acts of creativity. But I’ve also recently seen a “veggie” class, mostly Samoan boys, come alive when they were given the chance to write poems to a given form, taking pains and competing with one another to produce the most humorously telling pieces. And I remember the school classrooms I taught in – and

how positive many of my students were when I found ways to help them open the door to their creativity, and how surprised and delighted they were at what they’d created. Let’s not forget the pleasures of playing with ideas, words and forms, the inherent satisfactions in creating something.

Of course it takes committed, intelligent, informed work on the teacher’s part. For such teachers there are a range of books with good prompts, examples and exercises for students (here I’ll mention only the volumes of Harris and McFarlane, 1983, 1985, 1988, and McFarlane, 1997). Instead of saying more about the strategies teachers can use, I want to conclude with some more general remarks about the value of creative writing in English.

Creative writing deconstructs in practice some of the binaries that operate in English curricula: between writing and reading; between on the one hand the concrete and particular in aesthetic texts and on the other the more general significance that hovers around those particulars; between deliberative, evaluative, critical intellect and intuition, conscious and unconscious; and between the received and the innovative. If creative writing appears to lean to one side of the equation here, that may be no bad thing, given the current tendency in much English education to reach for generalizations in reading and teach for analysis in writing. Creative writing offers a corrective, by enabling writers to know through practice the value of “metaphorical reasoning”. English teachers and students may know something of this through reading aesthetic texts, and might know more of it through creative writing.

The imaginative, intuitive practices of language I’ve been discussing here are multifarious in their forms and irrepressible in their associative play. They liberate pleasure and energy through this play, and open those who practise creative writing to possibilities that deliberative, analytical thinking cannot engender or encompass – though as we have seen, such critical evaluative thinking is a necessary, complementary, productive partner. Not only in creative writing classrooms but in English education more generally, this partnership is crucial to a richer practice, in which (to return to that earlier quotation from Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi and Gardner, 1994) we seek “to transform, to change, to make things different from the way they were” (p. 35).

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Manuscript received: July 7, 2006

Revision received: August 1, 2006

Accepted: September 11, 2006