**Giving Houseroom to our Waifs and Strays: Questions for the Writing Workshop and the Writing Self**

**Philip Gross**
*University of Glamorgan, UK*

**Abstract:**
Starting from a practical session aimed at granting a written work autonomy to reply to its author, this paper points up choices individuals make in constructing a 'voice', a writing self. It takes the case of the creative piece rejected or distrusted by its author for reasons other than that of quality, and uses it to map some disputable parts of the borderline between the critic's and the writer's use of theory, with implications for the practice of the writing teacher too.

Eavesdrop on most writing workshops and you will hear someone struggling with the problem of finding, refining or defining their own 'voice'. To be more particular—since Creative Writing's instinct is for to go for specific detail before general theory—let us start from a subtle quandary which most practicing writers will know. Far from seeking to resolve that quandary, what follows is a way of heightening it until (like any good creative problem) it discloses something new. The practical exercise involves collaborative reading as much as writing, and is also a thought experiment which any writer can do in the privacy and honesty of their own time. For the writing educator, it hopes to shed light on the writing process from an unaccustomed angle.

Most working writers' notebooks contain waifs and strays—pieces we have written which seem well enough made, and yet, we think... *aren't us.* They feel discrepant with our images of ourselves as writers. The poem in front of you seems to speak in a voice you do not recognize as your own. (I am not talking here about personae. Many writers use a multitude of speaking voices on the page. But beneath them all the 'voice', in the writer's sense of a gestalt of style, approach and tone, is theirs. Reading the characters in *The World's Wife*, we never forget that Carol Ann Duffy's 'voice' informs them all.)

The misfit poem, though, sits on the page and looks at you. Sometimes it has arrived so rapidly and *necessarily* that you need to check that you have not simply remembered it from somewhere else. Sometimes, maybe, you have. But if not... what do you do?

At the 2008 Great Writing conference in Bangor, an invitation was offered to: '*a hands-on session for readers and writers, working with poems or short prose pieces volunteered by participants*. All participants are invited (urged) to bring pieces they have written which in some way don't feel like "the kind of thing I write"—not for reasons of *quality* but of *kind* (e.g.

of style, attitude, subject matter, meaning or approach).' The session itself began with a starter-pack of questions:

- Is your only consideration in your own writing whether a piece is 'good' or 'bad'? Or is it more complex than that?

- Is one of your criteria the extent to which a piece *sounds/feels like you* – i.e. seems to cohere with everything else you write?

- Whatever your ideals, can a publishing writer afford to ignore the fact that (now more than ever) a name in print becomes a *brand*? (Ask most editors or any literary agent. They know what they're selling.)

- What do you do with the kind of poem (or short story) that you leave out of a collection, because it 'doesn't fit'?

- Which of your 'children' do you value most—the one that is *most* or *least* like you?

- How does this connect to the very common experience of the 'otherness' of successful creative work—the experience people have sometimes figured as the Muse, sometimes as 'Language' (or, sometimes, a channeled contribution from Beyond)?

- And what is the relationship (not in theory but in fact—be honest) between that otherness (the unasked-for, the un-owned) and your sense of yourself, your writing 'voice'?

The choices implied here are partly professional. They are personal, too. What if you sent off that batch and the editors took just that one? What would that do to your sense of yourself, as writer?

Nor is this choice confined to published writers. Anybody with a writing habit faces it—and isn't our aim as writing teachers to ensure that all our students get a writing habit? Where students are involved, of course, tutors are vigilant for plagiarism. We also know that the most powerful source of learning in a writer's life is to read, be swamped by, and to imitate each new writer that we come to love. This is not plagiarism but apprenticeship. Writing exercises, too, can force new writers, healthily, to go beyond a narrow sense of their own style. At every stage a version of the quandary arises, only becoming sharper the more craft and experience a writer has... and once they have some public presence, sharper still.

Nothing that follows presumes that there is one right choice to make. But the quandary,

examined, opens onto wider choices that we constantly (consciously or unawarely) make. For the individual writer, what we do or don't *own* (or *own up to*) points to the way we use one of the everyday tools of a writer: one's self.

If Creative Writing as a subject has a theory—as opposed to a canon of how-to techniques—then some of that thinking must provide us with tools to consider and question choices... down to the level of the self. The questions above lead to that point. All are 'you' questions, demanding to be answered by an 'I'. But how, as writers and writing educators in the university, do we talk about ourselves… or ask our student writers to talk about *them*selves, crucially? We are committed to something more complex, and somehow more rigorous, than 'it's all subjective'. Yet Creative Writers in the university know they live under suspicion. Why, when so much interpretative theory exists in the Humanities—often applied to literature, the field in which we live and move and have our being—do we seem to use it relatively little? Are we simply soft? Or do we have other priorities… maybe concerning that word *use*?

The concept of 'self' is a case in point. Much contemporary thought in the Humanities would discard it, using a term like *Subject* to denote the human agency which, somehow, pens the words. At this point most Creative Writing students either recoil ('*What am I meant to do with that? How does it help?*') or pay lip-service, or genuinely get fired with the play of ideas… while still experiencing their creative writing, privately, in exactly the same way as before.

In *Writing: Self and Reflexivity*, Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson (2006) have provided an excellent aid for writing students not to feel outfaced by Theory, with a working overview of current readings of the self and with practical links to writing practice. We might need to go further still in establishing our ground—in particular, the distinctness of the matter with which we deal.

Creative Writing is concerned with *work-in-progress*—the unfinished piece. Once it is *finished* it enters the domain of literary studies. From there, it is text. Up to that point we have the text *and* the writer—the writing- and writer-in-progress, up to the point where the two become fully separate. (The metaphor not so much of *birth* as of a grown child *leaving home* is tempting here.) The texts teased and examined in the Waifs and Strays experiment may be drafted for the final time, but they are not *finished*. The sense that they nag their writer with their not-quite-fitting-ness is proof of that.

At this late stage, then, the writer's intentions, knowledge and associations (and blind alleys and mistakes) are still part of our materials. We still have the burden of choice—in other words, of self. One kind of knowledge that we deal in as a discipline has to be *self*-knowledge... which need not mean the mystical or even therapeutic kind. A sense (illusory or not) of agency, of relative coherence, is an everyday tool one works with as a writer. (This is quite distinct from writing *about* one's self, or 'self expression', which is a whole other can of worms.)

When Creative Writers and critical theorists disagree, the ghost of an old argument is in the room. We could be talking about Free Will. That debate too was bedeviled by the apparent clarity of *either/or*. In the practice of life, we might well accept that each action of ours will come to be seen (in long hindsight, in the eyes of social science or of God) as one in a string of calculable causes and effects… at the same time as we know that human agents do (and can only) experience themselves as choosing. The practice of Creative Writing hangs on acts of choice. That is how workshops work, the level on which, as teachers or as peer practitioners, we communicate.

Deft management of life, and of creative practice in particular, means the ability to move appropriately back and forth between levels—between a first-person and a third-person understanding of ourselves, using each in its own sphere of action—i.e. in the working context where it is of use. In workshops and in our reflective thinking, we hope to move outside ourselves to see what we have written, but we move back inside those selves when we imagine or edit and revise. To model and practice that skill, in writing and reading games like that described here, we need to point up the *other*ness of our writing from the moment we begin to write.

Most of the implications of the Waifs and Strays exercise can be condensed in one question, rather like a Zen *koan: Where is a poem before it is finished*? (For 'poem', read any self-contained creative work.) Is its future life

> (a) nowhere, nothing till it is finished, or
>
> (b) contained already, implicit, in the words of the existing draft (including their associations with world and language beyond) or
>
> (c) is it somewhere in the mind of the writer, en route to the page?

To say (a) is to decline to play the game the question offers, and anyway begs an equivalent question about what the quality called 'finished' is. To say (b) or (c) admits the possibility that the poem *is* somewhere, and something, before the writer knows it. This may be mythical thinking, but true myth is not lies; it is the embodiment in story of a real experience. The thought-experiment of Waifs and Strays proceeds from the assumptions that almost all experienced writers have some experience of *other*-ness, the un-willed or unchosen in their own writing… though the history of writing about writing testifies that they may account for it with different metaphors or theories. (On some form of this otherness, intriguingly, the high critical theorist and the most inveterate Romantic might agree.)

Less experienced writers, still wrestling with the craft needed to make words do what they intend them to, might need some encouragement to admit, and to appreciate, this 'other' principle. (Arguably, they might even need to establish a certain level of confidence in their ability to 'express themselves' before this process can begin.)

One of the easier options for student workshops is to home in on *what is wrong* with a piece of writing—a point made by Wandor (2008) as part of her thoroughgoing argument against the workshop method. The collaborative exercise I am describing here concentrates not so much on *what is right* as on *what sort of right-ness* a piece might possess. In the process, hopefully, it demonstrates some of the potential rightness of the workshop method too.

The purpose is to offer each written piece presented some autonomy. Most good writing workshops reach a point where they stop talking about authorial intentions and start asking what a poem *seems to want to be*, or where the novel seems to want to go. (This *want* too is a myth or metaphor, unapologetically so. With its nuances and ambiguities, a metaphor might be the most accurate expression of a complex situation. Another metaphor might be: any critical mass of language and invention will spontaneously generate new implications in a chain reaction of its own.)

In its workshop form, with a group made up of practising writers, postgraduate students and writing educators, the original Waifs and Strays session ran in six steps:
1. Everybody: on blank sheet, list the qualities you aspire to / value in your own writing at best.
2. If you have a 'waif' piece with you, turn over the paper and list the characteristics you see in it. This is not a question of more or less good / skilled / successful, but of

differences in kind.

3. Pieces pass to readers. *(If everyone brings one, swap. If 50/50, pair writers with readers. If less than 50/50, pass each piece to a small reading group. Writers can join in other groups.)*

4. Readers define (in writing) the qualities and directions they sense in the piece, plus practical steps to help it realise those qualities more. (Questions: what is this piece trying to become? Who does it want to address? What effect does it want to have on them? How can we help?)

5. Readers meet writers, and compare their notes—initially on the written pieces… though participants without waifs might like to reflect on the extent to which the qualities they list for their own (absent) writing seems to rub off on the qualities they find in other people's waifs.

6. Volunteers report back to the whole group, mainly on the process and on points they recognize as common property, though they can use specific examples from the individual work.

Point 6 was an educator's question, there to serve our interest in the process of the group—partly sheer curiosity, but also practical if it leads to participants developing their own variations on the same idea in other times and contexts.

The game as a whole, though, has its purpose back in writing practice, when the authors of the pieces, having *met* them with new objectivity, take them home and make their choice. Faced with a piece that had already felt misfitting, now developed to maximum otherness, do you:

a) attempt to revise it, in spite of itself, to give it the features (style or form or content) you associate with your writing self

b) reject it

c) accept it on conditions, e.g. by publishing it under a pseudonym or in a context (e.g. 'Occasional Pieces', 'Work for Performance') that distances it from your other work

d) recognize it as 'belonging' definitively to *someone else's* voice, in the sense of having absorbed such strong influence as to be more 'theirs' than 'yours' (and it might still be of value, as pastiche or as self-set apprentice work)

e) accept it totally and allow your concept of your writing self—your 'voice'—to change?

(Note to late-Modernist and postmodern writers who define themselves as 'experimental', oppose the concept of a lyric self, and might be feeling smug at this point: There might be a deliberate *rejection of the unitary voice* in some artistic projects… but can't you spot a J.H.Prynne or John Ashbery poem at a hundred paces anyway?) Whatever kind of artistic manifesto you commit to—whether your criteria are of commercial saleability or political deconstruction or spiritual enlightenment—you make a choice.

If the experiment described here succeeds, that success will be measured by the depth and richness of the questions it provokes. (By 'it' I mean the experience of *doing* it – a paper like this is the menu, not the meal). Some of the creative, the writerly, questions are sketched above. But there are questions, equally, for our pedagogy.

Most Creative Writing teaching still judges the success of an individual piece of writing by the extent to which it forms a *coherent whole*? (My arguments maybe contain a similar assumption, or why should I talk about the 'finished' work?) At the same time, an increasing number of courses also encourage, and reward, *experiment* and *diversity.* How do we foster both (opposing) principles? The Waifs and Strays exercise is one attempt to make of them a dialogue or dialectic—an experiment in what combination of *owning* and *disowning* one's own writing moves the writing forward fruitfully.

To push towards diversity—increasing Otherness—we already have resources. Techniques like automatic writing, Surrealist games or OuLiPo mathematical disciplines are ready-made tools to thwart the pre-cooked and pre-considered—to 'unlock' unconscious, unprepared material. Similarly, collaboration, whether with another writer of across art forms, uses the other person in the process to give the unknown or unprepared a presence in one's work.

On the level of theory, Bakhtin's concept of the *dialogic* suggests that it is possible genuinely to embody more than one point of view in writing. In the experiment described here, the work-in-progress gets to face its creator, like Adam. We encourage it to speak. In its different way, most Deconstruction is concerned to de-emphasise the role of the intending, writing self—a  challenge that does us no harm… with this caution: there is a world of difference between an approach that sees the web of implications and associations coded into language all round us as oppressive ideology, and that which experiences it as a source of richness, ambiguity and potential source of every human possibility (which includes oppression and addiction, alongside all the options through to delight and transformative

change). Writers tend to *love* language as a pig loves mud. (And how you interpret that sentence, what judgment you see in it, might define which principle you lean towards.)

As Creative Writing teachers work alongside colleagues in English, or Cultural Studies, or any branch of the modern Humanities, there will be debates about the ways we theorise, how we assess, our practice. If critical theorists tend to value creative work in measure as it yields insights to the theory, then creative practitioners might ask the mirror image of that question in return. The questions are not contradictory but complementary. And a good writing exercise does what a good poem does—contain, enacts and stimulates ideas, rather than simply expressing them. I hope the thought experiments described here are both practical, hands-on… and also alert to deeper implications which might come in from the outside with our waifs and strays.

**References:**

Duffy, C. A. (1999) *The World's Wife*.  London: Picador.

Hunt, C. and Sampson, F. (2006) *Writing: self and reflexivity* (3rd ed.). Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wandor, M. (2008) *The author is not dead, merely somewhere else: Creative Writing reconceived.* Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

**Correspondence:**

Any correspondence should be directed to Philip Gross, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Glamorgan, UK (pgross@glam.ac.uk)