Teaching, Writing, Publishing: the necessity of isolation?

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Abstract:
This essay is a response to Alex Pheby's recent article "The Myth of Isolation: Its Effect on Literary Culture and Creative Writing as a Discipline". It examines how isolation comes in different forms, some of which could be considered essential to a writer's sense of creativity, and argues, contra Pheby, that a teacher's pedagogical duties include a realistic appraisal of students' work in relation to the commercial marketplace. Whilst students' enthusiasm to experiment with their creative practice should be encouraged whenever possible, this experimentation should be viewed as a learning tool, a means with which to engage with the art of writing and the culture which surrounds it. Yet creative writing is not only a difficult art to execute effectively, it is also a difficult profession in which to succeed, and University presses are no longer viable, either economically or, more importantly, pedagogically.

In issue two of this journal Alex Pheby (2010) delivered a reasoned and fluent argument against the notion (or, as he termed it, 'myth') of isolation in relation to creative writing, concluding that one of the university's roles was to support experimental writing through publication, away from the vagaries and homogeneity of the marketplace. Whilst much of what Pheby says amounts to a valuable and common-sense approach to the constant dilemma between student experimentation and the world beyond the academy, it would be apposite to examine some of his points more closely. I am not going to disagree with his descriptions of isolation as an impossible aspect of the writing act: no one exists in a vacuum, away from the gravitational pull of socio-cultural environments and influences. To claim that writers are capable of detaching themselves consciously from each and every possible stimulus is clearly unworkable – even (or especially) post-modern philosophy accepts that solipsism is unfeasible to the creative practitioner, to the realisation that no writer works alone, away from historical, geographical social and/or cultural influence. Yet Pheby takes this isolation versus assimilation theory one step further, stating that

> it is rare to find a writer who has no significant contact with other practitioners. Indeed, it seems that writers have always surrounded themselves with other writers (and, for that matter, readers), shared their work and operated as support for each other (p.53)

At best this is speculation: Pheby both cites the Bloomsbury group and the apprenticeship of Beckett to Joyce – yet these could easily be seen exceptions, as notable as Eliot's connection to Pound, well-remembered and singled-out relationships which make them remarkable and familiar. There are many other examples which could be trotted out, yet each friendship, each 'significant contact'

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might only serve to prove the opposite, by the fact of its fame. There are also many examples of writers who work on their own, adhering to their own particular version of the Romantic ideal of a garret and a flickering candle. Pheby provides no evidence to support his view other than his own opinion, and in return here I have deliberately provided none to support the contrary position: in which case, neither view is proved nor disproved, if such a thing were possible for what are purely subjective statements – yet that is the point: these statements (Pheby's and mine) *are* subjective – and any authorial quotation or comment to back up either view would be at best questionable, an isolated response to a socio-political position. If we had to hand a body of evidence of authorial action, given in and of the moment, without thought of social, economic or (personal) political advantage, then perhaps a critical mass could be reached. Until then, it is opinion only.

More fundamentally, one wonders why writers would want the support of others: certainly the idea of collective editorial aid comes to mind, the stimulation and artistic companionship on which Pheby places such strong importance – and perhaps in an idealised world this notion of writers' collectives might apply. But whether we like it or not we exist in a commodifying world, where commerciality, privacy, selfishness and jealousy are facts of life. Far more than for a network for creative inspiration and production, it is perhaps equally valid to suggest that writers seek out other writers to support their egos, a situation perfectly described by Pat Schneider, Director of Amherst Writers and Artists: "I don't know how to express the almost ecstatic experience that rather frequently happens when people write together and affirm one another's new words" (Schneider, 2003, p.191).

The narcissistic quality of writers meeting each other is shown no clearer than in a creative writing workshop, at whatever level: to be told how 'good' or 'promising' their writing is; for advice on how to make their work more commercially viable (publication=justification); and for the soothing effects of a security blanket when their writing is not going as they want it to. Or, as Peter Finch describes it, "There might be a guide somewhere waving a map at the class but essentially the creative writing workshop [is] a forum for learning by sharing with a bunch of metaphorical hugging thrown in" (Finch, 1999, p.26).

A creative writing workshop can at times be an inspiring, enlightening place, full of mutual respect and honesty. But having participated in group environments as a

writer socially and at university, and taught at an adult, community-based workshop as well as at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, I can personally vouch for the self-help nature of groups, the mutual appreciation societies where criticism (which no one hears) is always couched in praise (which everyone hears – but that is the nature not only of writers but of humans generally, to focus on positives of selfhood and not self-examine, apart from the brow-beating and self-flagellating stage of the experiment of being 'a writer', who must suffer, because writers do.) This is personal experience, of course, yet reflects the science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler's terming of a workshop as "a way of renting an audience" (Butler, 2004).

Those cultured and civilised members of society who attend writing courses, worshipping at the feet of a master/mistress whilst drinking wine in the Tuscany hills, are celebrating the art of the artist. Courses such as these promote writing, yes, but they promote the actions of the Author rather than those of writers. Participants on these and other workshops are using them solely as a way to validate that their particular, individual (isolated?) thoughts are worthy of being written down: 21st Century culture and the leisure economy dictate that all voices are worthy of being heard, that all expression is not only valid (which it surely is) but also deserves to be read by others (which it surely is not). It is a kind of reversing of Andy Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame, where we do not get fame foisted unsuspectingly upon us but rather we demand our turn, that to which we are rightfully entitled by being active, engaged, sophisticated contributors to societal evolution.

In academia this delicacy, this deserving self-importance shows itself with each new cohort of under- and postgraduates: "But I'm special!" they cry, one after another. Yes, you all are. Is it only me who finds that the students who you see but never hear, who do not regularly submit work outside of class for extra comment (and validation), who do not constantly ask for advice or clarification, are the ones who produce the most interesting and engaging work, those who learn, who practice, reflect and edit *on their own*?

This may be no more than anecdotal, a piece of polemic speculation potentially showing a jaded perspective on the part of the teacher, yet it echoes the implications suggested by Andrew Cowan's article "Questions, Questions" in issue 41 of the NAWE journal *Writing in Education*, (Cowan, 2007, p.59): "isn't it also the case that

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the best of your MAs tend to be the most self-reliant?" In the same article Cowan questions

> an institutional practice called 'creative writing', a set of bureaucratic and pedagogic activities that can never accord with the writer's actual experience of writing, that have meaning only in the context of an establishment that is in most respects contrary to most writers' sense of their identity, that is even, sometimes, destructive of their ability to write (p.58).

Cowan here is discussing what he sees as the difference between Creative Writing, in an academic setting, and what he sees as the realities of writing practice. When citing this same article Pheby argues that Cowan's pessimism and suggestions of teachers' suspicions of the act in which they are engaged is unnecessary, a position with which I agree wholeheartedly – an academic setting does not have to be 'destructive', to either teachers or students, and if either party believes the situation in which they find themselves to be destructive then they should change it, or get out of there as fast as they can. And it is the responsibility firstly of the teacher or workshop-leader to foster a supportive, creative environment, to provide what Graeme Harper has described as "the heart of what that *teaching* has always actually involved: the creation of an environment in which these arts can flourish *because they are valued*" (Harper 2005, emphasis in the original).

The workshop environment, however, or the wider group locations in which creative writing takes place (either physically or emotionally) still do not adequately disguise the isolated nature of what is going on: writing is an individual act, undertaken by one human being to show their thoughts and ideas to others. There are notable exceptions, as with the work done by Raymond Carver's editor, Gordon Lish, or that of Maxwell Perkins with F Scott Fitzgerald and Hemingway, or Charles Monteith with William Golding, yet these were post-text revisions done as part of the creative process, not the prime functioning of a creative individual. Writing is not a collective pursuit, aside from collaborative or team writing in script form – is it possible to imagine anything more horrific than poetry by committee, replacing particularised and private expression with words selected by how few object to them?

Pheby is keen to stress "writing in traditions of communal development of narrative, of performance (particularly in poetry), of oral and folk cultures, of culture in general" (p.52). But even this undeniable social aspect to storytelling is a separatist act, highlighting the importance or power of one individual over the group by means of

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their 'writing'. As writers we show our work to others whose opinions we value, but even then we are guarded and selfish, defensive, protective: to expose ourselves is dangerous as it leaves us open to attack – that display is even more potentially threatening when we are revealing secrets of ourselves in text, our views, opinions, private thoughts and interpretations, and our intellectual and expressive capacity.

Is isolation, as Pheby claims, a myth, or is it a constant? Or, more directly, is the *belief* in the myth of isolation a constant, a necessary, urgent tool for the aspiring writer to help them place themselves and their work in a social context? At whatever level we write or study we know that no one else, ever (in time and space), could write what we write: creative writing and the languages it constructs and employs are divisive, separating tools. We try to express our individual perceptions, our linguistic mediations, our personal socio-cultural baggage: there are many similarities between our separate interpretations, certainly, and work is produced in and of a culture, but each piece is not only one individual's creative response it is also a response *that only that person could have made*.

This is not to suggest that all work is original, but that each piece of writing is the result of an individual's response to their surroundings undertaken according to his/her interpretation of those surroundings, and his/her creative process. Writers are segregated, isolated in their receptions and translations by the limitations of language and perception: "words offer themselves to men as things to be deciphered" (Foucault, 2002, p.39). The work produced is done within a relationship to many other stimuli and influences, including other writers, agents and editors, as Pheby accurately discusses: Bakhtin cannot be ignored here. Yet ultimately these are only *stimuli* and *influences*, not the work itself, which is to a greater or lesser extent an amalgam of influences and personal response.

Pheby worries that

[T]he myth of isolation naturalises and universalises the object centred model of writing practice on which it is founded, relegating those practitioners who work within openly avowed networks of influence, those who do not focus on the product of writing, but on its practice, and those who have not published or cannot publish their work, to 'non-writer' status. (p.54).

As to Pheby's central question of whether or not this 'isolation' exists, this seems to me irrelevant – yet the argument that one is not considered a writer unless one is published is one of extreme importance. There is much more work to be done here,

socially and contextually, and in examining how universities currently address these issues, if at all. Publication is not a mark of accreditation, a welcoming into the world of 'authorship': writers are people who write, and universities provide space and time for that to occur, in whatever form that work takes.

At the micro level our role as teachers is to allow students to respond to stimuli, to encourage individuals to behave as individuals, to isolate their expression from the homogeny of others, and yes, to experiment, as Pheby says. But whilst describing this experimentation (or the possibility of it) he also implies that by encouraging students to develop these isolated responses to their stimuli "[T]he myth of isolation misrepresents the processes our students wish to be taught, it limits the possibilities of their practice - and of the practice of all writers - to that which can be successfully marketed" (p.54).

A perplexing notion, on many levels: how in this instance are we to define 'the market'? Is it merely the commercial, industrial one, or is it personal? For even by presenting work in a workshop environment students are still engaging with a market, albeit a limited and self-serving one. In this context, the work is still being 'successfully marketed'. And with Web 2.0 changing the traditional models of 'the market' so rapidly and readily, with the easy and free options of self-publishing online, the "possibilities of their practice" are extended to include a market which is more open than it has ever been, regardless of how 'isolated' the writer is.

The relationship between the writer and his/her market is an area which cannot be ignored, or be treated as if it somehow sullies the aesthetic purity of the discipline. Naturally academia should enable (if not promote) conditions where writing deemed 'experimental' should occur – As Pheby says:

> there must be a point at which those things that are particular to writing, but which cannot be taken up by commercial interests, are fostered, protected […] Failure to do this would be to suggest that these areas were not worthy of attention and would seriously undermine the credibility of Creative Writing as a discipline (p.56).

One of the university's roles is to develop the subject in this way, to allow students similarly to develop their own writing, yet this must take place with knowledge of the market: it would be a failure on the part of the teacher if experimentation took place without at least a concept of the marketplace in which such writing is going to have to try to survive once the protection of an academic career is removed. Writers make

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choices about their (potential) audience and readership each time they write, whether consciously or otherwise, and have to negotiate the awkward border between expression and readability – part of the creative process involves making that compromise (or not), and learning about our own process involves making our own, individual and isolated decisions about the extent to which we choose to engage with our market.

What is it that we are teaching in creative writing classes? There appears to me to be a noticeable conflict between what students expect to be taught, at every level, and that which we feel we are there to give them. Students come with varying expectations – some bring professional ambitions, some want only to learn the craft and skill to better their work, aesthetically. Yet for both types of student, and for all those in between, the questions of publication and financial returns still remain. Should we therefore be preparing students for life in and of the market, or providing a location for free expression, away from market forces? Does the former disenchant, or provide realistic, practical help? Does the latter develop writers who will not be able to write for a living?

As teachers we have a responsibility to engage students with ideas of creative compromise, to give students the tools with which to make their own choices. To state with some fervour, as Pheby does, that the university should publish students' work which is commercially non-viable is to miss the point – for if as part of the learning process the act of creative experimentation is all that matters, then why does it need to be published? To do so when it is otherwise deemed 'unpublishable' only promotes and perpetuates the commodity-based definition of the term 'author'. Once out of education, away from the crutch of an anaesthetised environment, it is up to the individual to promote, develop, adapt, improve and refine his/her skills, whether experimental in nature or not, and then to decide for him/herself if he/she wants to engage with the publishing industry. And, since access to the market is easier than it has ever been, why should universities fill a breach that is not there? It is up to each individual writer, not the university, to decide whether he/she wants the accreditation of the term 'author', the wider validation. We (should) give them the abilities to define their market for themselves, for that is part of our job.

It is worth remembering here that the university is not the real world. This is good. But it must relate to the real world, or it is meaningless. At postgraduate level this is

perhaps even more important to remember, as we are dealing with students who are committing to writing in an academic context, away from the vagaries of the commercial marketplace: "For academic purposes, it is perhaps unsurprising that the values of the marketplace are often at cross-purposes with the idea of literary production - let alone whatever might be said to constitute 'research' in creative writing" (Nelson, 2009).

In my experience, and in that of many colleagues I have spoken to, many – if not most – postgraduate creative writing students want to earn a living by writing (in some fashion), and they want to know how to do that. Since the customer is always right, or since we want our courses to be popular (and therefore bring in more students to raise our research profile), we pander to commerciality, tailoring our modules to some extent to include notions of publication and/or financial return. To judge from an article by Nicola Woolcock in *The Times* (16/1/10, p.35), we do it well, perhaps too well:

> Analysis by *The Times* shows that the popularity of [MA] courses has infiltrated literary prize lists. Whereas 20 years ago creative writing qualifications were almost unheard of, being a graduate of a prestigious course now appears to be a springboard to success.
> Of 89 authors on the shortlists of the Man Booker Prize, Orange Prize for Fiction, and the Novel of the Year and First Novel categories of the Costa Book Awards in the past five years, almost one in five had an MA in creative writing, or a very similar qualification from a foreign university.

There is a strong argument here that if students want to be shortlisted for the Man Booker prize, or to win the Bridport prize, or to write a play which will be broadcast on Radio 4, then that is what we should teach them to do. Within the range of creative experimentation which is fomented in universities is there also a pedagogical duty to give them commercial guidance, if that's what they want? Yet, as Jen Webb (2009) noted in volume 1.1 of this journal, there is the distinct danger that this is a short-sighted attitude, that publishers are fast becoming not only aware of creative writing postgraduates but also tired of them. The article in *The Times* cited above goes on to quote Ellah Allfrey, deputy editor of *Granta* magazine, who treats publishers and the 'success' of these authors with more scepticism:

> One potential negative is if publishers become lazy and look only to creative writing programmes…There's a certain style of writing that you can recognise now…there's a danger of [students] writing with an eye fixed on what's going to work commercially (p.35).

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Thus, as teachers, we have to temper our enthusiasm to students' publication needs with a large dose of pragmatic realism. The work they produce whilst safely snuggled (or isolated) in the protective bosom of academia will help them learn about themselves and their writing, but it should not be judged as a means to anything else, as Nigel Krauth (2008, p.10) explains in his essay on the mutations of the novel when written as part of an academic career:

> The academic novel has some quirky features. You don't just write it, you enrol in it. You don't just live in a garret to produce it, you attend classes/workshops/progress meetings. You don't have a private, lingering, developing affair with it, you have a supervisor or a supervisory panel who butt in on the intimacy of your writing it. [...] Importantly also, you don't write it for yourself and (hopefully) the thousands of others who will read it, you write it for your supervisors initially, and then, your examiners.

There is no need to publish this novel, or any other student work. If it is deemed worthy of being read by a market, whichever form that market takes, then it can be published (as in *publicare*, to make public) for/by that market. When Pheby states that "[w]hat is required is for universities to find ways of fostering all forms of writing practice and to disseminate material produced under their aegis, when necessary by-passing the commercial environment" (p.57), I reply "Why?" Is it to cater to the ego of the writer, to reinforce the notion of 'authorship', which Pheby so decries?

I would argue that by secluding students away from the real world, without an adequate conception of what that real world entails, we are not helping them. Allow them to experiment, yes, encourage them to, but "foster all forms of writing" as a learning tool. We are teachers, not publishers. To hide students away in the protection of academia, and thereby ignore the realities of writing, does nothing to teach them about the isolated resilience and bloody-mindedness needed by writers, the commitment to their art in the face of commercial or market-driven resistance. Whether in education or not, writers are isolated beings, divided from other humans by their own particular ways of seeing and expressing the world. Once they have finished their studies, the rest is up to them. "The academy is not the real world. In taking and accommodating [creative writing], the university needs to realise that it is minding, for a time, a wild animal, one that will always seek to be free" (Krauth, 2008, p.19).

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