

BASTARD BOHEMIA

Creative Writing in the Universities

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IT IS DIFFICULT, in an age when most of the fine arts are taught on campus, to keep patience with those who oppose Creative Writing as a legitimate university pursuit. Musicians, painters, actors, dancers, can come to the campus and few eyebrows are raised, but let there come a writer to the university and even before his first drink at the Faculty Club he is asked to argue the proposition that writing cannot be taught. The lady of the streets who is asked by every neophyte whoremaster how she got into the business can be no less bored than the writer by this kind of importunity. The point is, you cannot teach philosophy or mathematics or physics or political science either — not, at any rate, at the level the poor writer's interlocutor is insisting upon. What he is really saying is that you cannot teach a Dostoyevsky how to be Dostoyevsky, or a Dickens how to be Dickens, or an Eliot how to be Eliot. As usual, he is dead right.

There should be an answer to these attacks, a definitive one, but unfortunately there is none. There are, however, points that can be made about writers and writing students on campus. My own belief is that writing workshops are valuable adjuncts to learning the craft of writing. I did my own graduate work at the oldest and the best known of them and, looking back, I consider the experience to have been a valuable one whose positive aspects outweighed the negative ones

by a considerable margin. Now, fifteen years later, I have come back to teach at a university where the climate for writers and writing courses is favourable. I write these remarks, therefore, from a privileged vantage point, and I make them with the hope that they will be of help to advocates of Creative Writing courses and that they might rally some support from the uncommitted.

There is nothing new or startling about offering creative writing courses, at least in North America. Eugene O'Neill attended one fifty-odd years ago; Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller were Theatre Guild drama students just before the war. Writers with styles and interests as widely separated as Wallace Stegner, Robie Macauley and Flannery O'Connor attended the fledgling Iowa workshop in the thirties and forties. In 1965, the students of that writing centre will publish eleven novels and seven books of poetry, and its staff will have published half a dozen volumes by the end of the year. Iowa is exceptional, of course; its workshop has been in operation for nearly a generation and it is rich in university support and grants and scholarships so that it can attract the best student writers. A great number of campuses have flourishing full-time writing programmes, and the university or college in the U.S. without at least one writing course in its calendar is the exception in the mid-sixties. The argument about the fact of writing courses on American campuses has been over for nearly fifteen years, and published authors, even quite famous and influential ones, are as much at home as faculty members as — say, Galbraith, Bundy, Van Allen, or Milton Eisenhower.

In Canada, the argument is hardly begun, but there are writers on most campuses, and Toronto, Sir George Williams and the University of New Brunswick have at last established writers-in-residence. The author just chosen for the Toronto post is Earle Birney, who for nearly two decades has been the country's best-known and most forceful advocate of creative writing as a legitimate university pursuit. His elevation is poetic justice of the right and proper kind. After nineteen years of struggle, the single course he began giving in 1946 at the University of British Columbia has expanded to become the only Creative Writing Department in the country. Among academicians, and oddly enough among writers too, there are still residual doubts about the validity of this kind of creative pursuit. What lingers, is, on the one hand, the view of the older generation of authors that bohemia is the place to learn to write, and, on the other, the academic view that writing, like making love commercially, is best kept in its own district and designated by lights of an appropriate colour. The two views merge in the end and may perhaps be dealt with concurrently as we go along.

Bohemia (I use the word here to mean the "territory" the writer inhabits

intellectually and spiritually but not necessarily physically: Henry James “lived” there as certainly as Balzac did) has a strong appeal. It is far from deserted. Nor should it be. Bohemia is freedom from compromise — the kind a man makes when he takes a job and must conform to specifications set up by one managerial system or another. It is freedom from commercial commitments which say “Fashion sells” and “Give people what they want”. It is freedom from the pressures of the manners and mores of society — which are always designed to prevent the boat from rocking under those who have got it made. It is intellectual freedom from philosophies — political, economic, psychological and religious — which are largely deterministic, naturalistic, anti-individualistic and Philistine despite much protestation to the contrary. There are fashions and fads, commitments and philosophies in bohemia too, but it is a good place and must be kept well populated — the best suburb of the conscience, without which the whole of our moral and cultural heritage might perish.

Fortunately bohemia is portable. Perhaps it began that way. When the Christians triumphed in Rome and outlawed, among other things, the theatre, the players took to the Roman roads and played split weeks at country fairs for nearly a thousand years before the onset of the Renaissance eventually broke down enough of the prejudice against the theatre to allow its re-establishment as a national cultural venture. The writers, meanwhile, became churchmen. For them, bohemia was not a physical thing but a state of mind, eminently portable. It was not cowardice that made them join the church. Writers have always gathered around centres of power. Like gamblers, they want to be where the action is; it is what they write about. The church, the court, the civil service, parliament, even the military, have all housed writers at one time or another during their careers. It has only been since the Industrial Revolution that there has been no natural centre of power and patronage. The writer also was disinherited when the machine arrived and God was turned into a loyalty oath, the king into a figurehead and the priest into a social worker. He was once again forced to take his bohemia with him as he disappeared into the streets where patronage was nil and starvation probable. Bohemia became a very real and physical thing, and a centre of power in its own right, but now its structure has begun to break down because a funny thing happened on the way to the end of the second millenium: the writer found a new patron in the University.

The University has always been a patron of course — of dead writers. Dead writers are the only manageable kind, and it seems quite natural in times when the University was not a great centre of power that it eschew live ones. But now

the University *is* a prime influence — perhaps second only to Government itself — where some of the most important problems and ambitions of our time are being served. The younger writers have recognized this and have begun to understand it as the first “closed” centre of power since before the Industrial Revolution which offers both patronage and residence. Physical bohemia is no longer a place where the writer *must* reside while he learns and observes; it has become again a state of mind, and the move to the campus is, among other things, convenient. Writers have always taught and coached and influenced other writers, in garrets, in coffee-houses, in country homes, or by personal correspondence and by the dissemination of their opinions and work. Now, with a preponderance of the young who are interested in writing attending colleges and universities the venue for this activity has shifted to the campus. There seems small cause for alarm.

YET THERE REMAIN reservations about the writer leaving bohemia to become a teacher. There is the fear voiced by the older generation of authors of selling out, of coming under the thumb of the patron power, of serving the power rather than criticizing it, of being made a slave of a new kind of conformity, of having no time to write. Is it a good thing to leave physical bohemia and accept patronage?

For the journeyman writer who has had commercial success — as for the author with private means or a rich wife — there seems no imperative reason to live and work on campus, but for the developing, emerging writer the negative aspects are perhaps outweighed by the positive ones. Within writing programmes there is a minimal amount of compromise necessary; forced commitment to commercial fashion is non-existent; the distance from the actual pressures of society as a whole is a comfortable and necessary one; there is time allotted during the year to write; and, as I have already suggested, the University is a centre of influence and therefore a good place for a writer to be. This is not to say that the campus is a *chaise-longue* without hurly-burly. There are students to teach, written work to criticize, visiting firemen to entertain, functions to attend, committees to be avoided, interdepartmental competition and politics to be fended off, necessary administrative duties to perform; but when living costs such an alarming amount even in physical bohemia, the campus seems a good investment in time and effort for the emerging writer. Perhaps as many authors are lost to

poverty, journalism, hack writing and too much time on their hands as are lost to teaching schedules, regular pay, meals and holidays, and a life that forces a planned work schedule. The 18th century musician-composer, I am reminded, had to come to the salon with new dinner music on a regular basis and he also had to put up with giving music lessons to his patrons and their friends, but his workroom was clean and neat, his status was good, and there was time enough left over to turn out a considerable amount of music that will live as long as there are orchestras to play it. The University is a good thing, by and large, for the emerging writer, provided that he is not simply a product of the campus and has never left it. Faculty status for the writer should, ideally, be earned and not follow as a result of receiving one or two post-graduate degrees.

There are dangers, of course. One, again suggested by the older writers, is that being secure the campus author will not write. The answer to this, if it is true, is to remove the security. Publish or die. There will never be so many positions open to writers on campus that there will not be competition for them. The one-shot wonders and the pure hangers-on may be easily weeded out and shipped back to bohemia. Another danger is that the writer, if he lives and works on campus, will become cut off from the world, from reality, will become institutionalized. Writers tend to retreat from the world when they write, and the campus bears considerably more relation to reality than does bohemia. In any event, by the time the writer has shown he has talent and has begun to develop, the experience he will use as a basis for his work has mostly been gathered, and the rest of his life will only add depth to it, confirm it, consolidate it. Experience is intellectual, emotional and spiritual as well as physical and, finally, it furnishes a way of looking at life however and wherever it happens. What a great number of people mean by experience (when they worry about a writer's involvement with society) is subject matter. If subject matter were the major consideration then Arthur Haley could have written *Crime and Punishment*, but total experience is a prime criterion and that is why Dostoyevsky wrote it.

A third danger is that, in trying to become a teacher, the writer will become an academic bent on turning out carbon-copies of himself. It is a problem he will have to work out himself, and the odds are tough. We live now in a society where job-training has become a prime concern, if not a compulsion, and where almost any real effort (other than mandatory lip service, ironically enough) toward pure education is liable to be regarded as tantamount to being soft on Communism. It follows, then, that one of the biggest problems the writer-teacher may have to face is the tyranny of the textbook — the training manual. Teaching manuals

are written invitations to professors to cease educating and begin training by rote, and they are invitations as well to the student never to enter the library except to find a table at which to eat lunch or to find a Friday night date. The writer-teacher, despite administrative pressures, must avoid both the manual and any suggestion of rote; his business is to help the student-writer solve his writer's problems and not his career problems. The present job-training system is a vicious one, but it is fashionable; however, it would be unfair to locate the blame for it anywhere in particular. Systems grow in response to felt needs and expedients of all kinds, and they habitually become larger than individuals. But, still, it is the present system that allows the antiphonal academic to flourish. Perhaps the way to begin stopping this statement and response training at the undergraduate level of universities is to encourage students to participate in the kind of courses that can be taught in no other way than by the lecture-workshop method, until such time as it is possible to persuade the whole academic community that there are other ways of handling large student bodies than are presently in force. I have no hope that the University will return to its primary role any more than I expect the Church to return to the simple teachings of Christ. The community we live in is fighting for survival. The two great explosions of our time — the population and the nuclear — will, it seems, allow none of us the luxuries of real academic standards, leisure and intimacy. We must find them where we can. If the University, at almost every level, is not to become entirely a trade school, then some of the students some of the time must be free to indulge themselves in some of the conditions that lead toward pure education.

If I have digressed it has been primarily to suggest that the writer-teacher on campus might, despite orthodox faculty fears, be a force for good. There is a new kind of crisis in education. There is not only a demand from society that large numbers of students be trained, but there is a demand that the experts who teach solve some of society's most pressing problems. But to teach under the present system exhausts the professor and makes it difficult for him to meet either demand. Changes must be made. The problems society faces do not require trained personnel; rather they require educated people. I regret the aphorism because it is only going to lead to arrogance: it may be possible that the writer-teacher is a harbinger of that necessary change. Here is a man who comes to the campus and, from all available evidence, flourishes. Why? Perhaps it is because the subject he teaches cannot be taught in the manner the present system calls for. Student writers cannot be trained; they can only be educated. A department trapped happily in this kind of circumstance bears watching. Its administration necessarily

breaks with some present academic routines. Its approach necessarily involves the student doing more and more productive, self-educative work and receiving less and less spoon feeding as he approaches the B.A. level. Teaching the student in a writing class is similar to coaching an athlete who can run a little and who must be made to run a lot. Oddly, this is called training, and the training we do in classrooms is called education. But the help given a man which enables him to see how to run faster and farther is conducted with a subtlety not usually associated with training. It becomes physics, chemistry, anatomy, strategy, discipline, direction. Were the coach able to retain his youth he would become a better runner himself. Thus with the writer who comes to campus to teach. He does not simply instruct a student in the mysteries of a mechanical process. Writing, too, becomes a number of other things. It also becomes anatomy, strategy, direction, discipline, as well as psychology, anthropology, philosophy — it becomes finally shared experience, and the teacher gathers strength and stimulation from having to articulate that experience. In the orthodox department at the university, under the present undergraduate system, the instructor must somehow inject the contents of a course into the student: the writing instructor's problem is the opposite. The case for forming and observing separate writing departments at universities lies here; drawing a course out of a student instead of injecting it into him may not be a new idea, but I doubt that it's a working one at the moment.

A student does not take writing courses because they are easy; they are not. He must prove, whether freshman or graduate student, his abilities before the course begins, and he must be accepted as educable by the professor to whom he applies. This, of course, is when examinations should be conducted — before, not after the course is given. There seems no logical reason why a student should be allowed to take a course dealing with philosophies of the nineteenth century just because he has passed five largely unrelated courses the year before. An examination should be given before the course to make sure he is ready to tackle the problems it raises. This would ensure a student's interest in the course, because he already has an investment in it; it would cut lecture time to a minimum and class time considerably. It would also reduce the student population to those who are educable. The rest could go to training schools where they would become technicians and therefore useful citizens instead of disoriented and often disillusioned holders of meaningless consultative or "teaching" degrees.

Once accepted into a class, the writing student becomes a member of a small group (fifteen at most) and it meets perhaps once a week for a couple of hours. He sees his instructor regularly as his own work progresses, and he faces public

criticism of his work from other students during class time. He is not taught in the accepted sense; he is tutored, drawn out, channelled, cajoled, pushed toward becoming capable of making his own rules in terms of his own work and viewing the world through his own eyes. There are no texts, no hard and fast techniques or methodologies, no parroting. The student reaches into himself, and, whether he becomes a writer or not, he will never be the same again so long as he may live. He has made something of his own, something original and therefore unique. He has, in effect, played God (that most exhilarating of all human pursuits), modelled a little universe, peopled it, judged them good or bad, punished or rewarded them, pitied or reviled them, and perhaps, if he is really going to be a writer, he has learned something about compassion. He has been forced to look at the place where he lives and has necessarily wanted to see patterns, meanings, significances. As his confidence grows, he stops gaining only knowledge and begins achieving understanding — the Cain-mark, surely, of someone who has had the courage to murder rote in order to free himself to create. As things stand now, this is very different from applying one of Newton's laws, remembering that Hardy considered himself an ameliorist, or conjugating foreign verbs, but even these things, all of them I think, must become more attractive and interesting because suddenly, in the first romantic excess that follows creative commitment, everything is of significance and importance. In the successful creative mind — writer or otherwise — this voracious intake of equally weighted facts and impressions gradually solidifies into a healthy and hard-nosed wonder and awe that is a prime requisite for important original work. Whether the student gets this far or not is less important than the fact that he has learned something about teaching himself. Seldom does this happen now until students reach graduate school.

OUR WORKSHOP METHODS at my University differ from instructor to instructor, but each of us would agree, I think, that our approach is eclectic. Our understanding is that on the undergraduate level we are dealing with the results of nearly two decades of home and school environment and training. While our students are bright and more than usually sensitive, the majority of them are far from original, and their lights are hidden under bushels of pre-cooked, pre-digested and canned cultural responses. The only "teaching" tool we have at our command is that they are all at the point of rebellion. They know

something is wrong, that life should not submit to the patterns suggested by father's politics and business ethics, the fearful symmetry of mother's morality, the anaemic compromises of teacher's rote, or even the appealing romantic cynicism of the powerful teenage sub-culture from which they are struggling to become separated. To serve this groping for originality by suggesting simply another pattern would be disastrous. Our approach is basically one that is designed to keep them moving toward freedom of thought and response while at the same time applying some of those attributes of writing that seem to us to be common to fine literature from the Greeks and the Bible to the present.

At first glance, this seems an essentially conservative approach. In fact, it is just common sense. One cannot teach originality; one can only preach awareness of the conditions which allow originality, and for my own part this is what writing workshops are about. Nor does this mean one teaches simply techniques; rather one insists on a concern for craft because this concern will free the young writer toward getting down on paper the only original thing he has to offer: his own unique response to being alive and having to die. Human systems may be bad, but the divine one is palpably and tragically and illogically impossible. It is basic to all art.

This, then, is what *happens* at a workshop session: over a work brought to class, a student writer confronts a dozen or so of his peers who react as best they can as intelligent readers and an instructor who insists that the craft of the writer meet and serve the intentions of the work being considered. It is out of this confrontation that critical and technical discussions grow. A student whose mind is a blunt instrument will soon be confronted with the fact. Someone whose vision of life is clear and individual will be encouraged and will gain confidence quickly. Each work is not just a problem extracted from life (although that is its genesis) but is also a problem in art. Technical concerns become apparent quickly, and gradually the workshop members learn for themselves — and in terms of their own work — about the uses and abuses of techniques.

In the freshman and sophomore years, it is difficult to conduct a workshop without the help of an anthology of stories, plays and poems. Few of the students — however much they have read — know how to read. And none of them knows how to read for craft. It is in this area that pure instruction is valid. The faster writing students learn to read as writers, the quicker they will advance as writers. Hand a class of beginners Henry James' "The Real Thing" and most of them will simply be bored. Take them through it in terms of the problems James solved in order to be able to tell the story and they will at least be impressed. Each of

them has observations and chunks of experience that seem unwriteable because they do not “scan” as narratives. Give them Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find”, which is at first glance a straight narrative, and they will immediately be involved in a search for meaning in terms of the craft of selection and deletion. Gradually, as we read more, they begin to see that writing is an impressionist’s art. Soon they are turned inward to begin developing their own sensibilities and outward toward the human condition in terms of their own observations about it. Seldom do big miracles occur, but small ones do all the time.

Personal writing problems are talked out in the instructor’s office. These sessions often seem to lead nowhere, but I believe contact with the instructor on a tutorial basis is an absolute necessity, and one which is becoming increasingly a luxury as universities grow larger and the staff-to-student ratio becomes smaller. A “hung up” student is a “hung up” writer. One does not need to be a psychologist to be a writing instructor, but it helps. For the student, writing stories or poems for consideration in the workshop is an exhilarating thing, but it is also competitive and traumatic, as many learning situations are — educational theorists to the contrary. The hour or so the student spends each week in the office of his mentor may mean the difference between beginning to educate himself and sinking permanently into the easier and more immediately attractive training programmes he is experiencing elsewhere. My own belief is that a student who shows some promise should be kept writing until it is apparent his personality and ingrained sensitivities cannot support the kind of disciplines writing demands. Literary history shows us that some have been able to write great works at twenty-one, but it is more usual to find authors achieving greatness a decade or two later. I, for one, do not want to take the chance that a late bloomer will be killed off by the kind of monolithically conformist welfare society we have developed in the twentieth century.

This brings us to the question of worth. The academic complains that creative writing is not a discipline. The older generation of writers complains that workshops are a waste of time. I suspect they are, in the end, saying the same thing: writing is a God-given gift; why try to teach it? The implication also resident here is that the writer is God-protected and slightly superhuman. He will write whatever the odds. Let us look at some facts. Canada has two cultures: French and English. The English-speaking Canadian has little literature to speak of, no theatre and no cinema. This is a culture dedicated to our perversion of the American dream which seems to say that every log cabin should house a potential statesman and every stump ranch a possible Faulkner. Obviously, this is not true,

and because of it we assume ourselves to be a second class people. That is not true either. There are Canadian artists and craftsmen all over the world, singing, dancing, directing, acting, writing, painting, to the greater glory of other cultures. We have refused them patronage. The result is that today there is literally no audience here for our writing, our theatre or our cinema. In Quebec on the other hand, culture has always enjoyed patronage. The National Film Board has allowed a cinema to begin flourishing there; government prizes and grants have given the kind of leadership that has resulted in public support for literature and the theatre. Soon, I should imagine, some of the arts in Quebec will be nearly self-sustaining.

But, it is pointed out, Quebec is a closed society, a culture that will die without forced feeding. I wonder if the effect of the facts of English-speaking Canadian culture is much different. The worth of patronage of any sort at this time seems obvious. The worth of any programme designed to foster writing of any kind is unquestionable. And the worth of a creative writing workshop within the University community is three-fold: it encourages writers in a culture which has not produced a public to encourage him; it produces, over the years, an influential audience made up of former students; and it acts as a focus of interest in writing within the larger community, which in turn, will help produce a wider and more receptive audience.

One more question remains: the question of the validity of the Creative Writing Degree. It is a question that could only arise out of a training-oriented society. A degree should be a badge proclaiming a student educated rather than trained. It should be a prize for excellence and not a piece of paper stating the world owes the holder a living. The creative writing graduate is not trained; but he may, in the end, be the better man because of it. In any event, there seems little harm in giving a man a degree for doing something original. We have been giving them for years to students who have done absolutely nothing original. If some department head mistakes it for a degree in English — well, *caveat emptor* — he may find he has hired an individual mind.

It is obvious, then, that the writer does not *need* a degree, any more than the musician, the painter or the actor. What he needs is a place in which to apprentice as a writer, a place where he can have the time and the leisure to develop, independent of the pressures of our incredible society. The Creative Writing Department is an innovation, a startling one both to the academic and the old-line writer. It seems to insult the status quo rather than simply upset it. Yet it is a necessary thing, I believe, or it would not have rooted and grown so quickly and

tenaciously in so short a time. I believe, too, that the pressure for creative courses in general and writing courses in particular will only become more widely felt as time passes. Gradually, for good or ill, as it is in the U.S.A., so will the campus in Canada become the place to learn to teach oneself to write. And — barring a complete take-over of the university by the business mind — the emerging, the journeyman, and even the emeritus author will find the university a place where interest in his work and his coaching abilities will always be resident. As his welcome grows and his students flourish it will seem neither strange nor illegitimate that Canadian writers work on Canadian campuses within independent departments dedicated to writing poetry, prose and drama.

Canada has had small success in producing a worthwhile body of writing under the aegis of commercial enterprise and physical bohemia. Perhaps the time has come to accept the fact of patronage and encouragement offered by universities as a likely means of achieving a reasonable interest in our own writers and their writing.

