Hobsbaum and His Legacy

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Creative Writing is now so much part of the institutional furniture it is easy to forget what a radical proposition it once was. During his long campaign to establish a writing programme at Glasgow University, the late Philip Hobsbaum took to arguing that the exclusion of living writers from the staff of literature departments in Scotland amounted to a politically docile acceptance of the *English* way of doing things. Addressing a specially convened panel at the 1988 Higher Education Teachers of English (HETE) annual conference, Hobsbaum described the study of English Literature in its present form as an invention of failed mid-Victorian classicists, whose "patriotic models of English teaching" and habit of reading Shakespeare and Milton for "revelations of national character" were later, and disastrously, imposed on Scottish Honours schools by early professors of the subject, among them A.C. Bradley, Walter Raleigh, and W. Macneile Dixon.[1] The adoption in Scotland of an historicist conception of Eng Lit "as taught at Oxford" had cut the link, Hobsbaum argued, not only to living writers, who were regarded with deep suspicion by the critical establishment, but to the distinctive and distinguished origins of literary studies north of the border, which lay not in philology or AngloSaxonism but in the practice of rhetoric, logic, and composition. Hobsbaum's modest proposal was that university appointing committees should set aside inherited prejudice and start hiring creative writers, with the added proviso that literary criticism — which was anyway just a matter of training students to write critical

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[1] Philip Hobsbaum, "The Teaching of Creative Writing," in *Channels of Communication: Papers from the Higher Education Teachers of English Conference 1988,* ed. Philip Hobsbaum, Paddy Lyons, and Jim McGhee (Glasgow: HETE88, 1992), pp. 9-15 (p. 9).

essays — be relegated to an 'ancillary' position on the curriculum.[2] The main business of a literary degree, he suggested, should be to make a contribution to the literature.

Other speakers at the HETE event included Alasdair Gray, James Kelman, Hunter Steele, and Edwin Morgan, two of whom (Kelman and Gray) would later share, with Tom Leonard, a newly established Chair of Creative Writing at Glasgow. Gray's contribution to the conference was to remember the creative writing groups that formed in Glasgow in the "high noon of the British welfare state, the nineteen-sixties," as well as the one meeting in Philip Hobsbaum's front room, in the early nineteen seventies. The Hobsbaum group Gray regarded as a model of its type. Work was shared "at the constructive level," with participants, including Hobsbaum himself, who sometimes submitted his own poems for discussion, encouraged to accept the strictures of interested readers as essential to the process of literary creation and valuation.[3] The contrast with the typical English Literature tutorial could hardly be more marked. Later on, Gray would come across an essay in which Seamus Heaney "dated Ulster as a district of self-aware, self-confident literary production from the arrival [there] of Philip Hobsbaum" (*ibid*). Whether the same might be said of Hobsbaum's contribution to the Glasgow writing scene is open to question, but it is at least clear that the radical egalitarianism of his meetings was pointed towards some sort of redistribution of power, back to the producers of literature, and that this same ambition drove his commitment to Creative Writing within the university, not as a sideshow to establishment literary criticism, but as an alternative to it.

Viewed from the present, Hobsbaum's HETE paper reads like a hopelessly aspirational document. The semi-corporatised university having long since learned the trick of commodifying dissent, Creative Writing is now as establishment as it comes — a key "growth area" for graduate recruitment, and, if the US situation is anything to go by, "the largest system of patronage for living writers that the world has ever seen."[4] Hobsbaum rightly thought it disgraceful that universities

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[2] Hobsbaum, as above, p. 12.

[3] Alasdair Gray, "Writers' Groups," in *Channels of Communication*, ed. Hobsbaum *et al.*, pp. 17-19 (p.19), and cf. Gray, "Writers Groups," in *Of Me and Others* (Glasgow: Cargo Publications, 2014), pp. 138-141.

[4] David Fenza, quoted in Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 24.

ostensibly committed to the preservation of literary heritage should offer so little support to living artists. That much has changed; but in most other respects, not much of his thought experiment has come to pass, in Glasgow or elsewhere. As Mark McGurl, author of *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Harvard, 2009), notes, Creative Writing, particularly at graduate level, is still largely "held in reserve" (16), and there is little appetite among the PhDs who run English departments for the idea that they might themselves teach it, or even, indeed, make it integral to *their* subject.

What we have, for the most part, is Creative Writing functioning as the "applied" arm of English R & D, while the central activity of humanities scholarship remains the "custodian[ship] of the obsolete."[5] And yet, it may be that literary criticism is in a position to perform a uniquely useful service to Creative Writing, now that they are both caught in the corporate-institutional nets. I take that to be, at least in part, the purpose of McGurl's important study, which builds its account of the "program era" around a close reading of the novels and short stories that have come out of it. That is to say, it tries to make visible the conditions under which Creative Writers now labour *as those conditions are manifest in the work they produce*. In that sense, McGurl's book is complementary rather than supplementary to the texts it reads — a guide to the predicament of creativity in the age of institutional indulgence. For those at the literary critical end of the corridor, meanwhile, McGurl provides not only reasons to read the work of their creative colleagues, but methods of addressing what, as more and more writers come into the university's employ, may well prove to be *the* principal overdeterminant of literary production in our time.

For those of us concerned, as Philip Hobsbaum obviously was, with the present and future conditions of Scottish literature, McGurl's approach is of particular value, and has the potential to re-frame some key debates. Take his account of voice, for example. McGurl argues that the exhortation to "find your voice" has displaced "show, don't tell" as the mantra of the modern Creative Writing programme. Of course, the phonocentric or "speakerly text," as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls it, has always been around, but McGurl suggests (p. 230) that Creative Writing's stress on the "textual performance of vocal authenticity" is something new and significant. Significant of what? Well, in the US context, of

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[5] McGurl, p.20.

"high cultural pluralism" — multiculturalism — and the "increasingly paramount value" being attached to "cultural difference" (McGurl, p. 238). McGurl argues that Creative Writing in its emphasis on voice as the primary vehicle of identity and political self-expression is now part of the "'machinery' — both social-institutional and overtly technological" — reinforcing that ideological consensus (*ibid*).

It isn't difficult to see the relevance of this to Scottish literary studies, where voice and vernacularity play such a key role in debates about national identity and political representation (or the lack thereof). If McGurl is right, it is a complex that lies at the heart of the Creative Writing enterprise, too. Certainly, there is no shortage of references to voice and its cognates in the half-dozen Creative Writing prospectuses I have managed to Google. In the case of Glasgow's programme, the ability to "experiment with a range of voices" is placed at the top of the list of attributes it hopes its students will acquire.[6] Not one voice, note, but many, and all of them made up. If nothing else, McGurl encourages us to ask if voice can ever be as simple, as non-committal, as that suggests. After all, political self-representation is principally figured as a matter of voice, "of *speaking for oneself*, or of *having one's voice heard*."[7] What, we might ask, are the wider implications, in this particular time and place, of a pedagogical system directed towards the "textual performance of vocal authenticity"?

At any rate, these are the sorts of question both the creative and the critical establishments in Scotland will likely want to pursue as Creative Writing begins to leave its permanent mark on the literature.

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[6] http://www.gla.ac.uk/postgraduate/taught/creativewritingmlitt/ Accessed 14 April 2014.
[7] McGurl, p. 260.