'They Gang in Stirks and Come Out Asses': Creative Writing and Scottish Studies

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Recommended Citation

McIlvanney, Liam (2014) "'They Gang in Stirks and Come Out Asses': Creative Writing and Scottish Studies," Studies in Scottish Literature: Vol. 40: Iss. 1, 7-14. Available at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol40/iss1/3

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“THEY GANG IN STIRKS AND COME OUT ASSES”: 
CREATIVE WRITING AND SCOTTISH STUDIES

Liam McIlvanney

At the start of James K. Baxter’s posthumously published novel, Horse (1985), the book’s eponymous hero wakes with a whisky hangover on the morning after flunking most of his first-year exams at the University of Otago, and imagines the conversation he will have with his father. When his father observes that he hasn’t been doing too well at the Varsity, Horse has a ready reply: “I don’t like it there. It reminds me of a cemetery. I’d rather be shifting round from job to job and trying to write.”

In Horse’s scenario, his father – who “habitually quoted Burns in times of crisis” – turns out to be quite sympathetic:

“I can’t quite see you as a college man, myself. They gang in stirks and come out asses….Do you know what a stirk is?”
“No.” Horse knew well enough; but he knew too that the Old Man enjoyed expounding the text.

“A stirk’s a steer. A bullock.” His father’s eye would light up with the joy of a Scotsman commenting obliquely on the facts of life. “The Varsity men are nothing but educated bullocks. That’s what Burns thought about it.”

The lines quoted by Horse’s father come, of course, from Robert Burns’s “Epistle to J. Lapraik, An Old Scotch Bard”:

A set o’ dull, conceited Hashes,  
Confuse their brains in Colledge-classes!  
They gang in Stirks, and come out Asses,  
Plain truth to speak;  
An’ syne they think to climb Parnassus

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1 This article is based on a paper first delivered at the “Professing Creativity: Teaching Creative Writing in Aotearoa” conference at Massey University’s Wellington campus, 14 February 2014.

The spirited contempt for academic learning that animates these passages is fraught with layers of irony. In disparaging those “educated bullocks,” Horse’s father is expounding a text (a popular Scottish sport since the days of the Reformation), while Burns’s dismissal of college-bred poets includes a knowing reference to classical mythology.

The ironies, however, run deeper. Though sometimes characterized as a wild, untutored genius, Robert Burns received (in the words of Scott) an “education not much worse than the sons of many gentlemen in Scotland.” Though he never attended university, his schoolbook – Arthur Masson’s A Collection of English Prose and Verse, For the Use of Schools (1764) – provided him with a kind of junior version of the courses in Belles Lettres taught in the Scottish universities, and when he moved to Edinburgh in the winter of 1786, Burns enjoyed a fruitful, if sometimes fraught, relationship with university teachers of literature, including Hugh Blair and William Greenfield.

In the case of Baxter, the ironies are, if anything, more telling. Within a few years of quoting Burns in disparagement of academic learning, James K. Baxter would take up a prestigious university residency named for the Scottish poet; the Robert Burns Fellowship at the University of Otago, which Baxter held in 1966 and 1967. The Robert Burns Fellowship aims to “encourage and promote imaginative New Zealand literature and to associate writers with the University.” During his own association with the University as Burns Fellow, Baxter wrote a prodigious quantity of verse, some of it inspired by conversations with Professor Kenneth Quinn of the Classics Department, who encouraged Baxter to translate Latin poetry and whose characterization of Catullus as a poet of colloquialism, obscenity and mock-solemnity clearly galvanized

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Baxter’s own poetry around this period. In his office in the English Department, Baxter was successfully endeavouring to climb Parnassus by dint of Latin, if not Greek.7

That New Zealand’s “premier literary residency,” attached to a university department of English, should be named for an eighteenth-century Scottish poet is not as odd as it might appear. It was in eighteenth-century Scotland that, according to one influential account, the university discipline of English Literature was established, by academics who saw it as their business to encourage creative as well as critical endeavor. In The Scottish Invention of English Literature (1998), Robert Crawford traces the academic subject of Eng. Lit. back to the courses on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres given by Adam Smith, Hugh Blair and others in the universities of Enlightenment Scotland. He also points out that “creative writing” was part of the discipline’s concern: “it is clear that from the beginnings of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres in the Scottish universities, the reading and writing of contemporary literature was bound up with the subject.”8 As Crawford goes on to argue, many of the key figures in the teaching of English Literature in the nineteenth-century Scottish universities – men like William Aytoun at Edinburgh, Robert Buchanan and John Nichol at Glasgow, and John Veitch, briefly at St Andrews before moving to Glasgow – were themselves published poets and dramatists, and encouraged their students to produce “composition in prose and verse” as well as critical essays.9

It’s fairly clear that Crawford is constructing a kind of native intellectual and institutional pedigree for his own pioneering efforts in the university teaching of creative writing. Along with Douglas Dunn, Crawford set up the first creative writing degree at a Scottish university when he founded the MLitt at St Andrews in 1991. And though the St Andrews MLitt is more immediately indebted to the kind of postwar

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9 Ibid., pp. 226-29.
American graduate writing programmes discussed in Mark McGurl’s *The Program Era* (2009), Crawford usefully reminds us that creative writing is not a merely modish or “exceptionally American” phenomenon but a practice that established its place in the curriculum at the very inception of English Literature as an academic discipline.\(^\text{10}\)

However, the line from Hugh Blair’s lectures on Belles Lettres to the contemporary writing workshops at Scottish universities is far from unbroken. Indeed, by insisting on polite metropolitan English as the language of composition, Scottish literary academics drove a wedge between university English Departments and Scottish creative writers (or at least those using vernacular Scots) that persisted well into the twentieth century. Moreover, precisely because Scottish universities were so central to the process of institutionalizing English Literature, they were rather slower to recognise their “national” literature than universities in other Anglophone countries.\(^\text{11}\) And so, while Scottish Literature as a body of writing has a very long history, Scottish Literature as a university discipline effectively dates from the 1960s, with the founding of an academic journal, *Studies in Scottish Literature*, in 1963, the formation of the Association for Scottish Literary Studies (ASLS) in 1970, and the establishment of an autonomous Department of Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow in 1971.

The “emergence of Scottish Studies” in the 60s and 70s took place at a critical historical moment, alongside the rise of Scottish nationalism as a credible political force (announced by the Scottish National Party’s victory at the Hamilton by-election in 1967), a remarkable resurgence in Scottish writing (associated with Liz Lochhead, Tom Leonard, Douglas Dunn, James Kelman, Alasdair Gray, Alan Spence and others), and the arrival of creative writing programmes in the UK with Malcolm Bradbury and Angus Wilson’s centre at the University of East Anglia and the proliferation of writers-in-residence.\(^\text{12}\)

These developments combined to make Scottish Literature specialists perhaps unusually engaged with contemporary creative writing. There are other factors, too. What we might call the uncertain institutional standing

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of Scottish Literature within the academy means that its practitioners (regardless of their “period”) are invested in the fortunes of contemporary Scottish writing (James Kelman’s 1994 Booker win, or the global éclat of Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting*) in a way that has no parallel for, say, Romantics or Shakespearians. In this respect it is telling that ASLS regards its remit as involving not just the dissemination of research or the provision of scholarly editions of classic texts, but the encouragement of imaginative literature through its annual *New Writing Scotland* anthology. It may also be relevant that the slowness of Scottish literary academics to engage with “theory” means that their preoccupations – with point of view, genre, literary form, style – have been close to the kinds of topics being aired in creative writing workshops. And of course, most tellingly, many of the pioneering Scottish Literature academics – Alexander Scott at Glasgow, Rory Watson at Stirling, Robert Crawford at St Andrews – have themselves been practicing poets.

It’s no surprise, therefore, that Scottish Literature specialists have been closely involved in the development of creative writing at Scottish universities. Crawford’s role at St Andrews has already been mentioned. At Stirling, Rory Watson, poet and author of *The Literature of Scotland* (1984, 2007), was instrumental in bringing Norman MacCaig onto the teaching staff in 1970 and in developing the creative writing dissertation. At Glasgow, Edwin Morgan’s presence on the English Department staff was important, though the graduate creative writing programme was established in 1995 by Willy Maley (professor, playwright and Muriel Spark scholar) and by Philip Hobsbaum, whose writing workshops (essentially a version of the Leavisite close-reading seminar) in London, Belfast and Glasgow did so much to develop the literary life of those cities. And Glasgow was the scene of the most striking manifestation of the new rapprochement between Scottish writers and the academy, when a new Chair in Creative Writing was – however briefly – shared by James Kelman, Tom Leonard and Alasdair Gray.

I’m not sure how closely – if at all – these developments are paralleled in New Zealand. Equally, it’s difficult to predict what might happen if, as seems likely, we are entering a “Programme Era” in both

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countries. However, I’d like to look briefly at three implications of the new institutional proximity between creative writers and literary academics.

First, it seems to me that more thought needs to be given to the implications of classifying works of literature as research. Clearly, the development of PhD programmes in creative writing, and the submission of novels and poems as part of research portfolios for New Zealand’s Performance Based Research Fund or the UK’s Research Excellence Framework, depend on the classification of creative works as a form of research output. In some ways, this development makes a lot of sense. If I can use myself as an example, my own crime novels have explored the issue of sectarianism in the West of Scotland and the implication of Scotland in the Northern Irish Troubles. That is an issue that can in some ways be more sensitively explored in a novel, in which one orchestrates differing viewpoints and proceeds through symbolism and suggestion, than in a piece of expository prose in which one constructs and defends an explicit thesis.

At the same time, there are problems in defining a novel as a piece of “research.” To the extent that a novel “presents research” it has generally failed as a novel. A good novel cannot be reduced to a thesis or to an engagement with social “issues.” A familiar – and to my mind patronizing – way of trying to “redeem” genre fiction is by pointing to its social significance, how it “holds up a mirror to contemporary society.” This is to avoid treating novels as novels, and I tend to agree with Raymond Chandler about “The Insignificance of Significance.” A good novel matters because of the shape of its sentences, or because it “discovers” a new aspect of experience, or because it creates a world we can get lost in. A good novel is always bigger than whatever abstract “subject” it nominally addresses. It has a thousand subjects. It may contain anything and everything. It is a world unto itself.

The problem is particularly evident when it comes to grading and examining creative writing PhDs. By and large, the criteria by which a university defines a successful PhD thesis do not map readily onto the kinds of strengths one might look for in a work of fiction. I recently examined a creative writing PhD for a university whose regulations stipulate that the dissertation should amount to “an integrated report”

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showing an “ability to carry out independent research” which constitutes a “significant and original contribution to knowledge.” I’m not sure that it makes much sense to discuss novels in these terms.

Second, as well as difficulties, the new rapprochement between academics and writers creates opportunities. That the literary academics and creative writers who increasingly share corridors in university English Departments might shape each other’s work was demonstrated by the poetry of the “Scottish Informationist” school in the 1990s.16 Equally, there is no shortage of “academic” fiction (think of the footnoted, essayistic novels of Nicholson Baker or David Foster Wallace), and it has been suggested that the “metafictional reflexivity” of postwar fiction reflects its production in and around the academy to the extent that “all novels aspiring to the honorific status of literature must be considered campus novels of a sort.”17

But there may also be scope for criticism to adopt (or perhaps rediscover) some of the techniques and procedures of fiction. I recently examined a PhD thesis in which a discussion of John Updike’s novel Terrorist itself took the form of a short story, with the author imaginatively reconstructing Updike’s thought processes and aesthetic decisions as he composed the novel. The result was a winningly nuanced, undogmatic discussion of Updike’s fiction, full of what Milan Kundera calls the “wisdom of uncertainty,” that left me wondering whether criticism might not fruitfully move in this direction.18 Perhaps the critical essay could be a method of raising questions about a text, of orchestrating a polyphony of voices, instead of committing always to a strong, coherent thesis. It’s worth remembering that some of the most vital and perceptive literary criticism of the nineteenth century appeared in symposium form, in the peerless “Noctes Ambrosianae” in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine.

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17 McGurl, The Program Era, p. 47.

Finally, I hope that the rapprochement between creative and critical practices helps us to appreciate the value of creative writing as a pedagogic tool in the study of literature. It’s no secret that you learn how to write by reading. Indeed, in my experience, the daily process of chalking up your five hundred or a thousand words of fiction is fueled by bursts of reading. But it’s also true – though less often acknowledged – that you learn how to read by writing. You can better understand the technique and style of a writer by seeking to emulate them. When I taught the fiction of James Kelman in an honours paper at the University of Aberdeen, I used to divide the students into small groups and give them half an hour to write a short piece of prose – a weather report, a football commentary, a fairy tale, a bible story, a scene from a work of classic literature – in the style of James Kelman. I would perform the exercise along with them, with my own task being set by the students: I remember once being challenged to rewrite the lyrics to John Lennon’s “Imagine” in the style of James Kelman, which certainly put me on my mettle.

This exercise tended to work fairly well. It was unexpected and challenging, and it also got the students thinking seriously about the angle of approach that a self-consciously political novelist like Kelman might take towards a particular subject. But above all it showed the students how difficult it is to write like Kelman. They learned that it takes considerable craft and discipline to achieve an apparently artless vernacular style. Arguably this kind of exercise works best with a writer like Kelman who has a highly distinctive style, but the teaching of genres like the sonnet, or techniques like Free Indirect Discourse, could equally benefit from such exercises. All this is to suggest that, as Mark McGurl argues, “creative writing should be integrated much more widely into the English curriculum and not held in reserve” for aspiring writers.19 We come back to the same principle: studying literature and writing literature are symbiotic practices. Sometimes the best way up Parnassus is by dint of Greek.

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19 McGurl, The Program Era, p. 16.