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DAVID MORLEY is Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Warwick.

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DAVID MORLEY
and
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FOREWORD: ON CRITICISM AND CREATIVITY

Creative writing has been the subject of university-level study in American universities and colleges far longer than it has been within British higher education. The common pattern in the American system has traditionally set the 'writing program' apart from the critical, historical and theoretical work of the 'literature' department. Typically, the *writers* will be employed for the drudgery of instructing students from almost every discipline in 'freshman composition' (how to structure an argument, a paragraph, even – remedially – a sentence) and then be rewarded with some small-group teaching in which, at a more advanced level, they assist the aspirant writers of the future in the improvement of their novels, stories, scripts and poems. The *academics*, meanwhile, will teach a freshman survey course of the kind that used to be known in the trade as 'from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf' but that is now more likely to be a guided tour of competing theoretical approaches to the subject and to include a high proportion of contemporary, often international, literature; they will then teach other, more advanced courses in their specialism, which could be anything from Shakespeare to the Victorian novel to some aspect of literary theory to postcolonial women's poetry. In terms of their ambitions for publication, the 'writer' will be working on, say, her latest novel and the 'academic' on a learned conference paper that will later be worked into a critical book for a university press. It is not unknown for the writers and the academics to neglect each other's work and even to view their counterparts down the departmental corridor with a degree of suspicion.

There is no inherent reason why there should be such a division between criticism and creativity in English studies. Consider the higher-level teaching of music and art, the disciplines of writing's sister arts. University degrees in music do not confine themselves to questions of form, history and cultural context, as English degrees often do. They have an emphasis on technique and on practice that is rarely encountered within a traditional English degree. The serious student of music will be expected to read music, to play an instrument, to hear a shift from major to minor key. Similarly, the serious student of art

will be expected to know about perspective, to discover the different properties of different materials, and (one hopes) to draw in a life-class. It is not usually demanded of literature students that they should be skilled in the literary equivalents of such techniques as playing a scale, composing a variation, sketching a nude: they are not habitually asked to scan a line of verse, compose a sonnet or sketch a fictional *mise en scène*. An education in the art of writing is often regarded as marginal to an education in the art of critical reading (as the agenda of most English departments used to be) or the art of cultural poetics (as the agenda of most English departments has become). But it is precisely this gap – an education in the *craft* of putting together words, analogous to the craft of putting together musical notes – that creative writing programmes can fill. A healthy dialogue is one in which critics are interested in writerly skills – rhetoric, narrative construction, pacing – and students of creative writing are unafraid of critical judgement.

Historically, the origins of English literary criticism belong within the realm of creativity, not that of academic analysis. John Dryden was long known as the father of English criticism. In the second half of the seventeenth century, he established the terms of debate that dominated critical discourse for a century: what were the relative merits of the ancients and the moderns, of native and continental models, of blank verse and rhyme? What was the correct balance between 'art' and 'nature', the best means to achieve verisimilitude? What ultimately constitutes good writing? As he put it in his preface to *The State of Innocence* (1677), his dramatisation of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, 'By criticism, as it was first instituted by Aristotle, was meant a standard of judging well; the chiefest part of which is, to observe those excellencies which should delight a reasonable reader.' But, and this is the key point, Dryden developed his critical art not in an 'academic' context but in a creative one, that of the prefaces to, and essays about, his own plays and poems, in which he had self-consciously set about modernising and classicising English writing during the Restoration era.

In the early eighteenth-century *Spectator* essays mainly by Joseph Addison and *The Tatler* mainly by Richard Steele, questions of literary style were closely linked to debates about national identity and gentlemanly behaviour. The figure who dominated literary debate in the public sphere in the second half of the eighteenth century was Dr Samuel Johnson, a journalist and all-round writer, not a university teacher. So too with the Romantic and Victorian eras: the major critical opinion formers were themselves either poets (most notably Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Matthew Arnold) or journalists, lecturers and what we now call 'public intellectuals' (William Hazlitt, John Ruskin). T. S. Eliot was not only the most admired poet but also the most influential critic of the modernist period of the first half of the

twentieth century. It was only from the 1930s onwards that what might be called 'pure' or 'academic' criticism became the norm.

Furthermore, criticism was often forged *through* creativity. Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* was a poem and there was a symbiotic relationship between the creation of his mock-epic masterpiece *The Dunciad* and his dispute with rival textual editor Lewis Theobald over the highly technical critical matter of the emendation of Shakespeare's texts. Coleridge's lectures on Shakespeare were partly shaped by, and help to explain, the search for inner unity that he also undertook in his poetry. John Keats offered a 'reading' of *King Lear* not only by way of marginal annotations in his copy of Shakespeare, but also through writing a sonnet. T. S. Eliot's essays on the rich complexity of the metaphysical poets and the Jacobean dramatists were intimately bound to the difficulty and originality of his own verse.

The ascent of literary theory in the late twentieth century took the divide between criticism and creativity to an extreme. Writers became notoriously wary of theory: they found its jargon repellent and its reports of 'the death of the author' unacceptable. Theorists, in turn, were more interested in patterns and deep structures, ideological formations and hidden abysses, than writerly craft and the judgement of 'literary' qualities. In the early twenty-first century, the symbiosis between criticism and creativity has to some degree been restored. At school level, it is now quite common for a 'critical' essay to take the form of a 'creative' response: instead of writing a formal essay about the motivation of Lady Macbeth, students are invited to write her imaginary diary. At a higher level, the *fin-de-siècle* age of anxiety in English studies is well and truly over. Academics have learned to stop worrying and to live with a diversity of critical practices. And it is practice as opposed to theory that is making the running.

Late twentieth-century theory was dominated by a hierarchical model, a pyramid-like corporate structure with gurus at the top (Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Said), high-profile publishing and conference-going disseminators just below, then the foot-soldiers of the profession (the overworked, undervalued lecturers and assistant professors) and finally the students. Orders went out from the top, prescribing the latest theoretical *diktat*. Early twenty-first-century practice, by contrast, is more like the modern 'flat' corporation, in which different approaches are respected and students are empowered. More than lip-service is paid to the rhetoric of 'transferable skills' and student preparedness for the workplace. Old taboos have been stripped away: styles of critical discourse are more colloquial, less mandarin; personal testimony and the articulation of feeling are no longer outlawed; attention to the texture of authors' lives is once again allowed. The latter interest signals a radical departure from the old 'new criticism', in which the text was king, and from

deconstruction, in which the author was dead, and from 'new historicism', in which texts were generated less by individual agency than the circulation of social energy.

Critical approaches are now judged more by the criterion of their usefulness – for students and, more utopianly, for society and the world. The author has returned, biography is newly respectable within the academy and there has been a growth of metabiography and 'cultural influence' studies that have placed literary works within a wider context than that of their purely critical or academic reputation. And criticism has itself become more creative, with fiction, memoir and the personal essay beginning to be regarded as acceptable forms of critical practice – though if this sort of thing is to be done, it has to be done well, self-critically and not self-indulgently.

In the work of the teachers and students in writing programmes, we witness ample, and highly diverse, examples of the dialogue between criticism and creativity, with a focus above all on the practical application of writerly techniques. The essays in *The Cambridge Companion to Creative Writing* demonstrate how the personal, creative and critical combine to create a fresh and important debate about the discipline of creative writing, its relation to literary studies and to other forms of knowledge including science, and to understanding how it might evolve in the future in the academy and the wider world. Here, the writers and the academics are genuinely companions, not rivals – in fact, the distinction dissolves.

Jonathan Bate