Secondary English, Creative Writing, and Moral Education

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The purpose of this paper is to outline some philosophical arguments for the importance of creative writing practices to secondary English studies and to moral education. The thoughts presented herein are the philosophical points of departure for a larger project that I am developing at the moment, and which I hope to begin in earnest next academic year. The purpose of that larger project is to work “up” and “through” further philosophical approaches to creativity and creative writing practices in secondary education, and to “test” these against students’ perspectives on their educational experiences generally, and on a term-long series of creative writing workshops that I will run as part of the project. As we will see, my philosophical approach involves consideration of the aims of education (and the positioning of the student-as-moral-agent in terms of those aims); the role of arts-practices in education and how these relate to what it is to know; and reassessment of just what is meant by the designation “creative writing.” I will argue that creative writing practices, understood as modes of knowing rather than means by which students attain to forms or bodies of knowledge, make good John Baldacchino’s arguments for “unlearning”; situate the student-as-moral-agent at the centre of its educational aims; and promise to enact the pedagogical dynamics of what Rancière calls the “emancipated spectator” and the “ignorant schoolmaster.”

Aims of Education

Firstly, then, the aims of education. The aims of education should be subject-centred, but I mean this rather playfully and in a sense that I draw from John White, who argued some time ago that the subject at the centre of education should be the human subject, thought as a moral agent. The focus of the curriculum, he wrote in 1973, “is now not a way of life in general, but this boy’s way of life or that girl’s. This will no doubt vary according to the individual. […] [T]he child must be at the centre of all he learns; education cannot be ‘subject-centred’ in this sense” (that is, of attaining to a body of received knowledge). It is obvious that questions surrounding the aims of education can’t not be moral questions, because, whether it is the subject-as-human-moral-agent or subject-as-field-or-topic-of-study that is the subject of educational aims, these aims always involve decisions as to what is “good” for the learner. The subject-centring that I take from White encourages a shift in what is meant by moral education: moral education will not be about the teaching and learning of a preconceived moral “rulebook,” but, rather, about the development of capacities for moral decision-making and judgement. The only presupposition here is that increased moral capacity is a desirable educational aim.

Subject-centring thought in terms of moral agency brings with it its own challenges – to name just one such challenge, it requires us to reckon with the fact that individuals are, in an Althusserian sense, always-already subjects-of and subjects-to: that is, to be a subject is to be, in the broadest possible sense, socio-culturally situated, shaped, inscribed. (There are, of course, ideological and professional-institutional pressures on teachers to somehow factor such identitarian considerations into their classroom practice; and while I would hardly suggest that this is impossible for some subjects, it certainly seems that this is more easily done from some vantage points than others.) The subject-as-moral-agent orientation that I

1 John White, Towards a Compulsory Curriculum (Oxon: Routledge, 1973), pp. 50-51.
3 On this, see White, What schools are for and why, Impact 14 (PESGB, 200), passim and p. 19.
take from White would have as its aim not the student’s attaining to certain forms of received knowledge; rather, it would attempt to recognize students’ needs to expand their moral vocabularies and to set such expansions in process.

Such an orientation as I have, ever so briefly, sketched above will require a reconfiguration of normal teacher-student dynamics. I say “normal,” because I do not think that the teacher-student dynamic toward which my arguments will point is entirely unrealized; but I hardly think it is a recognized norm. This reconfiguration would look something like Rancière’s “ignorant schoolmaster,” a pedagogic situation in which, rather than merely playing at bridging the gap between (teacher’s) knowledge and (student’s) ignorance in order only to perpetuate what Rancière calls “the inequality of intelligence,” the aim is to forge a “path from what [the student] already knows and what she does not yet know, but which she can learn just as she has learnt” everything else. Rancière calls this the “poetic labour of translation,” the “art” of “putting […] experience into words and […] words to the test.” To repeat, I do not think this is entirely absent from teaching; indeed, I think that many teachers would want to identify with Rancière’s ignorant schoolmaster. But I also suspect that where such a situation or dynamic does occur, it sometimes (perhaps often?) does so because teachers act as Rortyan ironists of sorts, in that their own teacherly performances acknowledge while undermining their own supposed position as “guardians” or “caretakers” of received bodies of knowledge.

Here, then, we should turn our attention from the student as subject to the subject as subject. My concerns over English and what it might be good for run something like this (and I fear they will sound as echoes of familiar laments): that the secondary curriculum for English is faced with a turn – if not return – to “The Canon” and all the pernicious authoritarian implications such a return portends does, or at least should, give us pause for thought. For one thing, it points to a rationalization and reduction of English on an attenuated and ideologically tendentious model of history: the new English curriculum looks, in many ways, like a study of a list of the literary kings and queens of England (and perhaps a few of its imperial outposts). And there is, moreover, an ideologically troubling instrumentalization subtending the incoming curriculum: the good of studying “real” literature – capital-L literature – is supposedly that it brings students into contact with their cultural heritage, exposure to which is theirs by right. (This, for example, is the conclusion that Michael Gove draws, with help from a partial reading of Michael Oakeshott.)

The canonical turn is, it seems to me, a mechanism in a pretty ropey machine designed to reinforce some sort of poorly defined national identitarian narrative. But when it comes to a subject-as-agent orientation of educational aims, instruction in literary study

5 Rancière, Emancipated Spectator, p. 11.
6 On the cultural figure of the ironist, see Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (Cambridge: CUP, 1989).
which aims at inculcating in students a sense of the supposedly intrinsic importance of the literary canon, as such, will look deeply unsatisfying. It is not that English literatures do not have their histories and traditions – of course they do. But no subject as it is rationalized and taught in schools should be reduced to the terms of any other. For one thing – and thinking at a very general level – to do so is to reinforce an unhealthy hierarchy of subject areas. To say, for example, that the skills of basic functional numeracy and literacy are essential for successful life in the twenty-first century is to say one thing; to say that the indispensability of literacy and numeracy means that English and Maths are more important than other subjects is to say something quite different. Though things are beginning to show signs of change, responsibility for teaching the skills of basic literacy and numeracy have traditionally fallen to English and Maths departments and teachers. But to be functionally literate is not to do English; and to be functionally numerate is not to be a mathematician. The necessity of certain capabilities, then, can be no justification for the hierarchization of subject areas.

More specifically, as far as my concerns go, the canonical turn in secondary English relies on the presupposed distance between the authority or mastery of the text, which exemplifies and embodies that of the author, and the student in need of knowledge; the student, that is, as agent-in-waiting, or as a potential knower in deficit. It is this deficit model of the learner that Rancière contrasts with his ignorant schoolmaster. One form of the rationalization of canonical literature study runs something like this:

- Shakespeare, the Romantics, the great Victorian writers should be studied because of their historical importance to English (and world) literatures;
- their historical importance is their “cultural value”;
- that they are part of a national cultural-identitarian narrative of international importance makes them part of a larger national cultural heritage to which every school-student is entitled access;
- it is the job of education to “grant” children access to this cultural heritage.

This, in essence, was Michael Gove’s reasoning, when still shadow Education Secretary, in a 2009 address to the RSA. In Gove’s view, educational institutions and teachers are the guardians and gatekeepers of a store of knowledge, to which students have right and want of access. It is not hard to see, then, how a view of the teacher-as-gatekeeper fits hand in glove with a deficit model of the learner (Rancière’s student-as-ignoramus).

Gove’s gatekeeper and deficit views were advanced as part of a curious and rather vague attack on the argument from so-called “relevance,” by which, apparently, an out-with-the-old-in-with-the-new attitude towards culture is justified. But in what senses and on what bases is the work of, say, Carol Ann Duffy more immediately “relevant” to a fifteen-year-old than Shakespeare? The question is a bad one, for it takes for granted far too much about Duffy, Shakespeare, and teenagers (among other things). Easier, then, to speak of relevance. Easier, perhaps, but no more instructive. It is hard not to think that “relevance” as Gove uses it is a mask for something like “apparent accessibility,” which is itself a mask for a superficial and superficially conceived “ease.” I say “superficial and superficially conceived” because, as many secondary English teachers will have experienced, the superficial or initial complexity of, say, Shakespeare’s language has a lot to do with what makes that language easier, in the medium- and long-term, to deconstruct and write about than many twentieth-century literatures.
and twenty-first-century texts (how can you not de- and re-construct Shakespeare, even in the most crude fashion, in order to demonstrate “understanding”?)

Not only, then, I am wary of too strong a canonical turn in secondary English studies, due to my resistance to the hierarchization of subject areas; I am worried, too, about what I see as a loss of contact with our language, as we speak it, and with that loss a subsequent loss of contact with the mythopoetic character of everyday life and its practices.10 These losses come about in part because of the misguided assumption that “our” language here and now (whatever that might mean) is transparent because familiar – we demonstrate this transparency through easy and successful language use each and every day – and therefore inartistic, whereas the language of canonical masterworks are not. They require attention, admiration even; they are art; they are language we can only aspire to understand; to demonstrate such understanding would be to demonstrate our having attained to certain forms of knowledge.

I am not interested in arguments about the use-fulness or -lessness, the so-called “relevance” or otherwise of Shakespeare; indeed, the common notions of utility and relevance are not the right currency in debates over literary “value,” and Shakespeare may well be “valuable” in the moral terms towards which I am moving. But the gatekeeper and deficit models of teaching and learning rest on the preservation of the distance, not only between Rancière’s teacher-knower and student-ignoramus, but also on the distance between the ignoramus and the schoolmaster, the ignoramus and the masterwork, and the schoolmaster and the masterwork. The gatekeeper and deficit models situate the student as subservient to the teacher, but also the teacher and student as subservient to the masterwork. What I hope to show is that there are ways in which what is vital in literature studies can be experienced most directly through creative writing practices – ways which lead us to rethinking the positioning of teachers and students; to a conceptual weakening of the supposed line between so-called creative and other writing practices; and towards re-establishing the lost contacts I have mentioned between us and our language, between ourselves and the mythopoetic character of the everyday.

Knowledge and Knowing; Learning and Unlearning

We need to think of English on the model of the arts, but the arts critically and cautiously limned. For some time I thought this obvious, but recently I have become unsure – not over whether English is an arts subject, but over whether its being so is obvious. At this point, then, I want to think a little about what is at stake when it comes to arts practices and their bearing on, or relationship to, what it is to know and to learn.

One of the reasons why secondary English might not be considered an arts subject, or why it might not be obvious to think it as such, is English’s status and categorization as a “core” subject. So categorized, it might seem to sit outside of and above other designations – arts, humanities, modern foreign languages, and so on. In work with which I am largely in agreement, John Baldacchino criticizes thinking that sees certain subject areas as “enabling” others; as subject areas, that is, that reinforce, in subtle ways and by dint of their apparent accessibility and ease, the skillsets required by “core” subjects.11 He does this as a part of a

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critique of teleological educational thinking (whether this be in service of foundationalist or constructivist loyalties). (It is worth adding in passing that Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences plays neatly into the thinking at which Baldacchino takes aim: where different practices or supposed forms of knowledge indicate increased development of more basic capacities, we can discern an implicit or presupposed equivalence of so-called “core” subjects with supposedly “core” capacities. So certain types of fine-art practice might be thought to “enable” Maths, as a “core” subject, because they require, say, a refined sense of proportion, geometrical relation, spatial awareness and so on.\footnote{See, e.g., Howard Gardner, \textit{Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences} (1983; New York: Basic Books, 2011).}

Though we argue from and towards slightly different points, I read Baldacchino as equally suspicious of the hierarchization of subject-areas as am I; he is also dissatisfied with any conception of arts education that sees the arts in terms of \textit{forms of knowledge} ready to be taught and learnt on a model of transmission and reception. What Baldacchino does not do – which is, from my perspective, curious – is bring English into the purview of the arts once he has exposed the problems with enablist thinking. This is a problem not because of my professional-practitioner biases, or an idiosyncratic desire to reframe English as an arts subject, but for two important reasons: firstly, so much of what Baldacchino has to say about the arts, but with visual art as his paradigm, holds true for the \textit{practice} of English studies and what in my view is most vital in and to them (we will come to this in final sections of this paper). Secondly, while Baldacchino’s critique of the logic of enablist thinking makes it harder to justify such thinking, he doesn’t quite dismantle that logic; for Baldacchino, the arts should not be seen as enabling “core” subjects, but there is no sense that so-called “core” subjects might be rethought as dwelling among the arts or other broader, interrelated subject areas. I would suggest that one of the best reasons for not seeing arts subjects as enabling English is that English is itself an arts subject that entails the sort of experimental learning and expansion of one’s horizons that Baldacchino is interested in as an aesthetic and ethical project.

In his RSA address, Gove claims that “[s]chools should be a place where horizons are extended, and eyes opened.”\footnote{Gove, p. 4.} Noble stuff, to be sure, but, given his apparent adherence to both the gatekeeper and deficit models of teaching and learning, expanding one’s horizons seems here to mean adding to one’s memory of the who, what, why, and when of, say, the literary canon. The sort of horizontal expansion Baldacchino is interested in, and to which I am sympathetic, is one in which leaners’ capacities to improvise their ways through the world are increased and enriched. There are any number of ways in which this basic idea has found articulation: Zizek’s Lacanianism, especially his idea of the return of the real; Blake’s insistence on experimentation as the only way to reacquaint ourselves with our essential and universal “poetic genius”; Heidegger’s ontology of the artwork, where art is a clearing in which the truth of concealment is unconcealed for the first time, each and every time; Deleuze and Guattari’s suggestion that art furnishes us with new percepts; Keats’s notion of negative capability; Dewey’s theory of experimental knowledge; Rorty’s insistence on the world-altering capacity of language. I am not trying to suggest that these figures are in some crude way “saying the same thing”; but I would venture to say that they seem,
almost intuitively, to tend in a similar direction – towards an articulation of our ongoing encounter with the contingent and symbolic nature of our cultural and acculturated lives. It is something like this that Baldacchino has in mind when he presses the case for “unlearning.”

“Unlearning” is neither a nihilistic nor primitivistic position; it has one foot in aesthetic and ethical philosophy (especially that of Adorno’s post-Hegelianism), and one in visual arts practice. For Baldacchino, the idea of unlearning points to a dialectically constituted conceptual and practical space of “argument” and “speculation,” to a process of “other than learning.” “Unlearning,” he writes, “neither seeks to resolve and less so eliminate the aporias that emerge from the tension between art and education.”

Unlearning is thought as being other than – or perhaps to – learning, where learning is thought on something like the spatial model of a room into which learners (wanting knowledge) are gradually ushered (by teacher-gatekeepers). Unlearning is opposed to learning, and art to education, then, when what it is to learn and be educated is subordinated by the gatekeeper and deficit models of teaching and learning, and what it is to know is thought in terms of attaining to forms of knowledge, where such forms are the sum total of that wealth, that inheritance, of knowledge and cultural capital that is always-already there and is our supposed birthright. To unlearn, then, is to engage in knowing as a dynamic process; it is not, to repeat, a primitivistic stance that posits some sort of a return to “originary” or “pure” forms of knowledge; rather, it is learning in something like the experimental sense proposed by Dewey, and perhaps even more so that proposed by Blake, who in “All Religions Are One” writes: “the true method of knowledge is experiment”; and “As none by traveling over known lands can find out the unknown, So from already acquired knowledge Man could not acquire more.”

One consequence of unlearning, then, is a conceptual becoming, in the Deleuzian sense, of learning and knowing: where the metaphors of rooms, gatekeepers, and ignoramuses were elements in a model which presents learning as the means to knowledge, in what Baldacchino calls “unlearning” learning is knowing and vice versa; rather than say the two terms are synonymous, we can say that they have become indiscernible. Rather than imagining learning as the process by which we attain to fixed forms, or bodies, of knowledge, Baldacchino’s concept of unlearning, in keeping with the other thinkers mentioned above, imagines the indiscernibility of learning-knowing as an asymptotic approach to an always shifting horizon: a very different conceptualization of horizontal enrichment, this, than that imagined by Gove.

In his most recent work, Baldacchino has proposed a shift from forms of knowledge to forms of knowing, with visual arts as a paradigm case; I would suggest, and he would seem

to agree with this,\textsuperscript{17} that an even stronger statement of this conceptual shift is not only from \textit{knowledge to knowing}, but also from \textit{form to mode}. This additional revision is important if one wants – and, certainly, it is what I want – to understand arts practices not as \textit{media} of knowledge, but as modes \textit{constitutive} of knowing-learning itself.

\textbf{Doing English}

As I begin to draw this paper to a close, it still remains for me to sketch the ways in which English, with creative writing as its primary practice, fits with the process of unlearning; more plainly, it remains for me to limn creative writing practices as modes of knowing, and to articulate their moral significance. Let’s begin with the essay.

There are at least two close-knit problems with essay writing as it is often tasked to secondary-English students: these are problems of what the essay is thought to \textit{be} and \textit{do}. Too often, the essay is not approached as a form, \textit{per se}, but a type of writing the form of which is a by-product of its function; and this function is to test students’ literary knowledge. What it is we supposedly “do” when we “do” literary criticism is, then, grasped easily enough, when thought as a set of procedures carried out on a text or texts. This procedural approach to “doing” English literature is particularly easy to discern at secondary level, where close reading is still very much at the centre of things. But literary criticism itself is seldom thought as a mode of creative self-expression, a mode of knowing, and this I consider a fatal flaw in our approach to literature studies (at, I suspect, almost all levels of \textit{formal} education). What this problem points to is both the difference between conceiving of what it is to know in terms of \textit{forms of knowledge} or \textit{modes of knowing}, and, related to that, between thinking of arts practices as producing \textit{media} for the demonstration of knowledge or as \textit{constitutive} of modes of knowing. Literary criticism at its best (tendentious and loaded a phrase as that may be) makes good, embodies, Rancière’s idea of the emancipated spectator, in which the spectator is no longer understood as a passive consumer of the artwork (the work’s necessary audience, but one who is both subject to and object of the authority of artist and artwork).\textsuperscript{18} Literary criticism, thought as an act of creative self-expression, is a mode by which the artwork is reconstituted, rewritten, as it were, in the act of criticism, which, as itself a creative act, also positions the critic as creative agent.

Having said all this, it is necessary to qualify, if only briefly, what is meant by the term “creative writing.” It is, in common usage, a doubly unfortunate term, for it is likely to be burdened by presumptions of a false easiness\textsuperscript{19} (not the same thing as “accessibility”), which has little or nothing to do with knowledge on the model I have been attacking (one might know \textit{how} to write a story, but that does not mean, on the old spatial model, that one knows any \textit{thing}). Moreover, creative writing, from at least Key Stage 3 through to undergraduate level, is hived off from so-called academic English in rather odd ways: on the one hand, academic English – the primary practice of which is some form of literary criticism – is still seen, to put it crudely, as the more “serious” way of doing English; on the other, relatively few universities demand examples of academic work as part of their admission processes for “traditional” English degrees, whereas some sort of portfolio

\textsuperscript{17} This claim is based on discussion with Baldacchino, PESGB seminar, Institute of Education, 26/11/14.

\textsuperscript{18} Rancière, \textit{Emancipate Spectator}, pp. 1-23.

\textsuperscript{19} See Baldacchino, “Art’s False Ease.”
submission is common admissions practice for creative writing programmes. What is curious in English studies is that ability in (or, perhaps, at) so-called “academic” English is still seen as objectively measurable by outcomes which allow admissions tutors to either take practice for granted or to not take it into consideration at all (an A* in English Literature “proves” that you know something about English Literature). By contrast, ability in or at creative writing is thought to be measurable only through demonstrated practice (you don’t need to “prove” that you know any thing, so long as you can show you know how to tell a story).

Just how wrong-headed this division within English studies is can be best brought out and best felt, as it were, if we bring those writing practices most often lumped together as “creative writing” to the centre of secondary English, and introduce literary criticism later as another form of creative practice and self-expression. The sorts of skills that current and incoming English curricula wish to assess – understanding of contexts of textual production and reception; understanding of writers’ craft – can clearly be developed through creative writing practices (note the addition of “re-creative” or “transformative” submissions on some coursework and controlled assessment specifications).

Not least, the capacity to unlearn – to argue, critique, debate, speculate – stands only to be expanded and enriched if we approach literary criticism and essay writing as modes of self-knowing among other such writerly modes (fiction, drama, verse, and so on), not as a means to some other end (i.e. that of objectifying knowledge already known).

Unlearning as conceived by Baldacchino involves a rejection of method and systematicity, where these suggest attaining to forms of knowledge, to set ways of “doing” the arts. But he is not, as he has made clear, against what we might call “technique” and “discipline”: in order to unlearn, it may be necessary for the visual artist to improve her capacity with line, perspective, or with her handling of negative space. For the writer, how to render linguistically the scene, the sensory experience, the emotion, the sense of movement, space and time – all will be a matter of technical refinement and disciplined practice though not necessarily of set methodological or methodical procedure. Perhaps the clearest analogy I can think of for the model of unlearning, for the image of Deweyan experimental knowing, and for the difference between technique/discipline and systematicity/methodology is that of the jazz musician. The supposed spontaneity that we often map to or read into improvised music can only be so mapped because the jazz musician has spent so much time refining, improving, enlarging their grasp of what we might call their grasp of musical “grammar.” So the model I am proposing for English studies is that writing practices are seen as creative arts practices, because writing is – in a basic, if in certain contexts bland, sense – constitutionally creative. Under the influence of Rancière’s emancipated spectator, reading and writing are mutually supportive and intertwined practices; two faces, if you like, of the same arts-practical coin: when one reads

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21 This was also discussed at the PESGB seminar with Baldacchino.

22 I would make a distinction between individual writers’ rituals, through which they might need to go in order to write, and the teaching of anything passing as “a” or “the” writing method.
critically, one (re)creates the text anew; when one writes, one reads one’s way, anew, through the world.

**Conclusion: Moral Languages and Horizons**

My sense of how and why English fits Baldacchino’s arts paradigm of unlearning, and why this is of moral importance in education, is in part a function of certain linguistic-philosophical commitments. My recent work has dealt with certain linguistic philosophers’ attempts to characterize metaphor. In particular, I was interested in the account offered by Donald Davidson, chiefly for what I see as its flaws despite its flash of creative brilliance. For Davidson, the difference between literal and metaphorical language mapped to that between meaning and use; literal language belongs solely to the “domain” of meaning, he claimed, while metaphor belongs to that of use. There are various reasons why I think Davidson’s theory ultimately fails, and there is not time to cover these in any detail. In brief, the idea that there are domains of meaning and use is a poor model for language, as meaning and use are inextricably linked, not least in the sense that language is used to mean, while, equally, meaning becomes established through repeated and increasingly widespread use. Davidson’s metaphor paper was first published in 1978, and would in many ways be supplanted by a later paper entitled “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” another equally brilliant yet problematic piece on malapropisms – the communicative success of deviant utterances – and what these tell us about the nature of language. The problem with this paper lays with Davidson’s proposal of prior and passing theories – again, there is no space, and it does not serve the purposes of this paper, to recount the details of these ideas. But what I am interested in here is the way in which aspects of Davidson’s work on metaphor and malapropism are picked up Richard Rorty.

Much of what Rorty has to say on language and metaphor will be familiar, so I will not rehearse it in detail; I will simply raise a few of his statements, which are derived in large measure from Davidson, to which I am sympathetic, and which I think help us get from English as a creative practice, or mode of knowing, to its implications for moral education. Rorty neatly sums up his understanding of the relationship between language and the world in the following way: we should not “think that [a] vocabulary is somehow already out there in the world, waiting for us to discover it. […] [T]he fact that Newton’s vocabulary lets us predict the world more easily than Aristotle’s does not mean that the world speaks Newtonian.” Rorty’s point is that what he calls metaphors are those changes to or shifts in our vocabularies that enrich our way of feeling and seeing our way through the world. Drawing on Davidson, Rorty views metaphors “on the model of unfamiliar events in the natural world – causes of changing beliefs and desires – rather than on the model of representations of unfamiliar worlds, worlds which are ‘symbolic’ rather than ‘natural’.” On Rorty’s account, “neither knowledge nor morality will flourish unless

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somebody uses language for purposes other than making predictable moves in currently popular language-games.”

“Metaphor” in Rorty is an expanded – and frankly rather baggy – concept, but it runs something like this: metaphors that are worth our attention are those that force us to re-theorize the world, because the interpretive rules for those metaphors have not yet been established. The metaphors that Rorty is interested in, then, are those that result in changed behaviours in or orientations towards the world. “Metaphor” in Rorty, then, becomes a metaphor itself for any instance of attention-arresting, behaviour-changing language, and the unit of such instances of language can be anything from the individual word up to a writer’s entire oeuvre. Moreover, because Rorty’s “metaphor” metaphor is conceived in moral terms, Louis MacNeice’s “cloud of witnesses” is, potentially, as equally metaphorical as my grandmother’s injunction that I pull my damn socks up, so long as both result in an altered moral attention to and in the world.

Rorty’s talk of metaphor is bound up with his talk of “final vocabularies,” by which he means something like, not the learning of dictionary definitions of new words, but the difference that being more or less fluent in Freud, Marx, pragmatism, Whitman, Wright, Davidson, and so on makes to our capacity for moral reasoning and acting. The moral importance of creative writing practices as I see it, then, lies not in them being used as a vehicle for some moral “message” or “rulebook,” but in their potential to expand their practitioners’ moral vocabularies and to change their orientation in and to the world. Creative writing practices have the potential to make us realize and act on Davidson’s claim, made in a very different context but which I do wish to preserve, that there is no “boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally.”

Creative writing practices on the model I have been advocating thus encourage a subject-centring of the sort I derived, early in the paper, from White. They also have the potential, though one cannot say that this is a necessary consequence, to resituate students and teachers in relation to one another. In the creative writing workshop, the teacher may be the expert by dint of having a larger vocabulary (in the Rortyan sense) than the pupil and, therefore, a wider range of coping strategies (though this is by no means a given). But, as with Rancière’s ignorant schoolmaster, the teacher need not be cast as gatekeeper to the storehouse or museum of knowledge, as now there is no such space to be guarded; both teacher and student, as practitioners, are engaged in an experimental pushing on,horizons.

A final thought: I have been lucky enough to talk with some of my Year 11 students about their experiences with and perspectives on English and education more generally. Though they do not have the philosophically inflected vocabularies that some of us have, what struck me during our roundtable discussion was the extent to which we all seemed to be tending in a similar direction. Clearly, there are a number of reasons why this might be, or why I might feel justified in saying this – interpretive bias; the possibility that I have imposed my views on my students with some degree of success; the possibility that they

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29 See Rorty, Contingency, Irony, Solidarity.
have imposed theirs on me. But I will end with a comment from a student that takes us back to White’s injunction that school curricula should be centred around the student as moral agent. When the question of how English and creative writing practices relate to ideas of learning and knowledge, one response was as follows: “creative writing is not something you’re taught, it’s something you develop. [...] It’s like self-teaching… you learn more about yourself.”

**Word count: 5528 (excluding footnotes)**

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31 Belas, interview with year 11 English students (recorded 21/11/14).