»Well done overall«

The disciplinary framework of modes and metaphors in creative writing feedback

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Surprisingly, given the proliferation of creative writing courses in the United States and the United Kingdom (where nearly all higher education institutions now offer creative writing degrees), the topic of how feedback is given by a writer-tutor to students has been little theorised. One useful American intervention from Richard Schwartz and Kemp Williams focuses on metaphorisation within written feedback; in other words the conceptual perspectives in which teachers frame what they are doing and the related terms in which they couch their advice:

> The mentor/mythic hero metaphor appeared universally in our sampling, though it varied in its manifestations. In some instances it appeared as a master craftsman/apprentice relationship; in one case it appeared as a priest/novitiate relationship; in still another as a psychologist/patient relationship. In every case, though, the essays communicated the sensibility of a guide who facilitates the maturation of the quester. Seen in psychological terms the story of the mythic hero is, of course, about the psychological, social, moral and spiritual development of the individual.[1]

Other operative metaphors found in student feedback in questionnaires sent by these authors to twelve college faculty include: consciousness raising, therapy, custodian of a tradition, role model, stimulator, provocateur. Equivalent roles existed for students, for instance: initiates, patients, apprentices, even customers (as it indeed increasingly feels in the monetised environment of British higher education).

1 | Schwartz, Richard A./Williams, Kemp: »Metaphors We Teach by: The Mentor Teacher and the Hero Student«, in: The Journal of Aesthetic Education 29 (1995), pp. 103-110, here p. 104.

More helpful, perhaps, were self-descriptions of the aims of faculty in so far as they described wishing to make students »more sensitive to language«, getting them to recognize the negative value of »bad patterns« and the positive ones of »efficiency and substance«. This difference highlights a triadic relation between how supervisors describe what they are doing, metaphors for what students themselves do, and what is made out of both in terms of textual product.

Value terms applied to the process of student learning include: the master craftsperson who can produce and evaluate a finished art work; the industrial style producer of texts; the quasi-scientist who »makes discoveries«; and the therapist who evokes secret knowledge and creative freedom in the student patient.[2] In this last metaphor, Schwartz and Williams argue, »Writing is the object of a neurosis that the mentor/therapist/teacher clears up by showing the hero/patient/student how to adjust attitudes, feel competent, and transform fear and loathing into pleasure.«[3]

The methods opened up by Schwartz and Williams are useful. I intend to extend the process a little further in reviewing the metaphors and more general advice I myself have used and given in written feedback for summative work in a decade of teaching the Master of Arts in »Creative Writing (Prose Fiction)« at the University of East Anglia in Britain, and other stints at Royal Holloway, University of London, and the University of Limerick in Ireland. This amounts to approximately 200 pages of feedback, averaging 600 words each; so, about 120,000 words. What follows below represents anonymised selected excerpts from feedback to students.

To my slight embarrassment, I find that the phrase most used (at the close of the feedback) is »well done overall«, which if metaphorised in English is likely to produce an image of smouldering boiler suit just out of the oven! But other patterns did emerge, mostly proceeding from selected modes within the elements of fiction whereby creative fictional prose is usually analysed, i.e.: style and language; voice; point of view; description, dialogue; time and place; dramatic structure; and character and consciousness.

While a wider and more scientific study of student feedback in creative writing is a desirable avenue of research, what I shall do in the case of this article is pick common or striking metaphors I myself have used, beginning the process of organizing them according to the element of fiction being addressed. At the same time, I shall mention common avenues of more general intervention in feedback, while reflecting on their disciplinary ramifications. The elements of fiction represent (to an extent) objectifiable knowledge drawn from the tradition of creative writing teaching in academic institutions (from

2 | Ibid., p. 105-107.

3 | Ibid., p. 108.

about 1930 in the United States and from 1971 in the United Kingdom), and from the broader field of literary practice and study. The context of this knowledge is worth briefly summarizing as it conditions the terminology of student feedback.

The critical context of creative writing feedback

The term »creative writing« was first employed in the sense we now understand it (as the academic study of literary practice) by Ralph Waldo Emerson on August 31, 1837, in »The American Scholar«, an address to the Phi Beta Kappa society at Harvard. The evolving history of creative writing courses worldwide is well described by D.G. Myers in *The Elephants Teach*.[4] More combatively, Mark McGurl's *The Programme Era*[5] examines the substantial influence on modern American literature of MFAs and similar courses. The current situation worldwide is surveyed in Paul Dawson's *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*.[6]

Despite the lag between academic acceptance of creative writing as a discipline in the US and Europe, creative writing knowledge has long been in the public arena in Europe, beginning with *On the Art of Writing* from 1916 by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, Professor of English Literature at Cambridge.[7] Next came Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* from 1921.[8] Writing guidebooks for the public thereafter became commonplace. Recent examples include *The Art of Fiction* by David Lodge, *How Novels Work* by John Mullan, *How Fiction Works* by James Wood, and *The Art of Writing Fiction* by Andrew Cowan.[9]

A much smaller number of similar books exists in other European languages, but the point must also be made that all these titles exist in a rich, broad, historical tradition of training texts in rhetoric and composition that stretches back centuries to classical times.

One reason that the United States has dominated teaching of creative writing is that it kept this tradition going from 1900, whereas in other countries it

4 | Cf. Myers, David G.: The Elephants Teach. Creative Writing since 1880, New Jersey: Prentice Hall 1996.

5 | Cf. McGurl, Mark: The Program Era. Postwar Fiction and The Rise of Creative Writing, Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press 2009.

6 | Cf. Dawson, Paul: Creative Writing And The New Humanities, London: Routledge 2005.

7 | Cf. Quiller-Couch, Arthur: On The Art Of Writing, New York: G.P. Putnam 1916.

8 | Cf. Lubbock, Percy: The Craft of Fiction, New York: Viking Press 1960.

9 | Cf. Lodge, David: The Art of Fiction, London: Penguin 1992; Mullan, John: How Novels Work, Oxford: University Press 2006; Wood, James: How Fiction Works, London: Cape 2008; Cowan, Andrew: The Art of Writing Fiction, Harlow: Longman 2011.

fell by the wayside (Britain) or remained firmly in the scholastic domain (Germany). Were it not for the First World War, which caused English Studies in Britain to divorce itself from the far more sophisticated German rhetorical and philological tradition, the story might have been otherwise. We would not have had to wait till the 1970s for creative writing teaching to begin in Europe; 1930 being roughly the origin date in the US as I have said, at least in the disciplinary sense that we would understand creative writing today.

To an extent, the titles listed above represent the typology of critical advice as it tends to be offered in creative writing courses. And to that typology must be added two others: the wider field of academic literary study, in particular as reflected by genre in theory of the novel courses and poetics courses (and their nonfiction equivalents, for example biography and life-writing); and secondly the vast field of exempla of the literary work in practice. Very often, creative writing tutors suggest to students the model of a particular work rather than its critical exegesis or a broader theoretical approach. That said, tutors will also often gesture to master-craftsman »vade mecum« texts, such as Henry James's prefaces and essays, or the interviews with various writers in *The Paris Review*.

But now let us turn to the feedback offered by one tutor – myself – identifying, according to each element of fiction, salient metaphors used with a view to understanding their resonance and potential for students and our discipline.

Style and language

The most commonly used metaphors with respect to this element of fiction are those of control, clarity and cleanliness. For instance: »There are occasional slip-ups in diction: ›palimpsest‹ p.3 is an overly used lit crit word. The preponderance of short sentences with simple clauses is good for clarity but can become a bit numbing. Alter the texture of the prose to add variety.« And: »There is some excellent work in this submission, which is full of fresh, clean writing.«

However, note »numbing« above, which is a bodily metaphor, as is also the case with »stumble and fall« in the following comment: »But as it is, you stumble a bit with the ›Bulldog‹ and fall flat on your face with an ill-advised discursive commentary, which really has dragged your mark down heavily.«

Elsewhere, we again see the prevalence of the body, with a connection made to the physicality of the text itself, through localized forms of enactment:

> This is first-class work. The writing is clear and powerful, with good modulation at the level of phrase and sentence. You enact well, tying sense to sentence structure, as in: »the mechanism sucks her ticket in, spits it out, does this repeatedly, pulling and push-

ing« (page 5). I suppose this might also be a metaphor for birth/miscarriage; something to develop in other narrative contexts perhaps (you should look at all ingress/egress in the book; smell is part of that).

A similar point is made in this feedback: »Sentence rhythm is also well handled, i.e. ›I saw only backs of heads: straw hats and swinging plaits and the sweat-slicked tails of men's hair – all inclining and bobbing together.‹«

The prevalence of the clean text metaphor suggests a discipline of hygiene with respect to writing, again bearing back significantly on the idea of the body. However, other domains are also employed for the same underlying idea, whether they be craft-based (»the well-made chair«), deriving from physics or mechanics (»a stable platform«) or some aspect of engineering (»you're reviving up too much here John, we need a period in which the engine cruises along«).

Voice

Here the metaphorisation is often self-reflexive, referring to the *evocation* or calling up of a voice, i.e. »The main strength of this submission is the well-evoked, mid-Atlantic voice of the narrator.« And this perhaps points us to voice being the most resistant of the elements of fiction not only to metaphorisation but to critical enquiry itself; for it is, so to speak, already bodily, and almost perverse in its individuality. But voices have a collective history and they half live in that, as the next quotation shows:

Now and then I think you use words (pucker, snickered etc.) which are part of a particular vein of US literary language, a sort of MFA rhetoric which in its way is as arcane as Tennysonian archaism. The external examiner refers to this (with reference to another script) as the radioactive waste of Raymond Carver and well, you need to keep an eye on that stuff. But all the business about breath and scuffing is really well done.

Note, however, the use of »vein« and »eye«, perhaps suggesting that even voice is best metaphorised in terms of other parts of the body. As an element of fiction, voice in itself stands in for other things, often, some kind of notation for an idealized concept of individuality, perhaps, one that in teaching is very difficult to isolate from style in the sense that linguistics or literary semantics (as disciplines) would understand it. I often use the metaphor of singing in a choir to encourage a student to understand that her voice is most universal when most individual.

This whole question is informed by the Bakhtinian concept of vocal plurality in the novel. The relation between individual and group, so often the subject

of novels, needs to be further understood with respect to the theory of voice in creative writing and literary criticism more broadly. Deictic shift theory, as developed by Peter Stockwell,[10] is a brilliant start, mapping voice of author, narrator, character etc. in relation with point of view and time and place (see topics below). The question of the reader's voice as part of this map, the idea of the reader's share, is what I try to develop at the end of this article.

The idea of mapping – as part of a more general spatial turn – itself provides a useful avenue for further inquiry into this aspect of the question of modes and metaphors in creative writing feedback, since it has already been critically developed with respect to metaphor (in terms of mapping from one semantic or categorical domain to another). However, individual authorial voice may also be the place where metaphor must necessarily falter, insofar as individual voice resists being co-opted into other domains. Sometimes a student simply says, »I don't want to do it that way, I want to do it this way« and that must be respected – or listened to – even in the teeth of one's best instincts!

To a limited extent, this tension is a reflection of the generic dominance of Anglo-American realism in an institutional sense. The welcome growth of creative writing courses in mainland Europe and elsewhere globally may do something to ameliorate this, given European and other traditions of the novel which prefer other elements of fiction, including voice, over those associated with realism (or even reject the conceptual framework of elements of fiction altogether). These questions could provide the basis of significant international research programmes in the future; the disciplinary relationship between creative writing teaching and world literature is what is at stake, and that is not an insignificant matter.

This notion of individuality (and by extension other traditions) may also be the explanation for the recalcitrance of voice as a critical topic, but it is also a function of the social resilience of the romantic idea of the artist. And that in turn is something which has significant institutional consequences for the semi-permeable disciplinary boundaries between creative writing and literary study more broadly; in the United States, creative writing departments are often quite separate from literature departments.

Point of view

Already optic and bearing too much towards film (one reason critics have followed Gerard Genette in preferring the term focalization), point of view is most often commented upon in terms of transition and movement, as if suggesting the flickering of the eye is itself what is at issue. For example: »Earlier, once

10 | Cf. Stockwell, Peter: Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction, London: Routledge 2002.

we are with Tim and Abby on the lake, the structure starts to break down a little, esp. after p41 and in the flitting transition to Melanie p50. I don't think you have quite yet mastered the art of moving between different points of view [...].« But note also: »The scene switches from Ayeesha to Sarah are a little bit programmatic – introduce a small portion of intervening material between the cue for the next scene and the pick-up.« The use of »cue« and »pick-up« here probably suggests the technical inheritance of point of view from cinema in the mind of the marker, though it was of course developed earlier by Henry James and his follower Percy Lubbock.

Often in teaching, one wishes for other metaphors than the optical. On the other hand, describing viewpoint characters as the »seeing eye dog of the reader« does seem to produce results with students. The link here with deixis and time and space seems significant.

Description

Here the choice metaphor is mathematical, as in »a high quotient of sensory detail and landscape description.« And also: »Think about how different types of socio-economic life interact, like sets (Venn diagrams) over-mapping each other: you can see how David Simon uses this approach in *The Wire*; George Eliot does the same in *Middlemarch*.« Why should this be so? One answer might be the relative weight given on the page to description versus action and dialogue, as in the following injunction: »The balance of description, action and dialogue is good and the pages ›look right‹ in that respect; this is very important.« It is interesting that this remark returns us to the optical, as if the ›point of view‹ of the reader's own eye as regards perception of page layout must be considered. It is perhaps worth remarking here the active inter-relationships between the elements of fiction, in this case between description and presentation. Indeed, it might be argued that one function of the novel is to deliver all these elements holistically.

That said, many masterpieces of fiction extend, distort or otherwise defamiliarise one or two elements of fiction at the expense of others. So in the case of *Ulysses* the time experience of a single day is defamiliarised perhaps at the expense of comprehension, insofar as Joyce's method involves extraordinary surfeits of rhetoric and diction.

Another aspect of comments made in respect of description (they might also apply to »style and language«) is the question of dynamism, again especially where the body is concerned, as follows:

The main strength of this piece is your command of imagery and physical description. Lizzie yawning without covering her mouth is good (page 3), as is her voice pouring out

»like thick cream« and her »quivering« underarms (page 5). The father's tie »with green carp swimming across the silk« (page 11) is also a strong image. It's important to understand why these images are good, which is largely because they are verbally dynamic. Try to apply this elsewhere, for example having Dunbar sweep his hair back rather than saying it was swept back (page 4). Make it active. Good imagery also often has a sensuous aspect, relating to physicality or to the organic in general. Sometimes, though, your images tip over into improbability: do the eyes of tornadoes »feel« (page 15)? If they do, how would we know what they feel like?

While this issue of dynamism is primarily focused on the local scene and the individual sentence, in another feedback comment we see how local dynamism relates to dynamism across the longer sequence of a narrative, which would fall under »dramatic structure«, below: »There is a nice local sense of dynamic movement, i.e. Mads Jansson wiping his hands on his apron cloth, but this is what is missing in a more global sense, in some chapters at least.« Dynamism as predominant metaphor is itself innately metaphorical, one might argue, since it involves sweeping movement across thresholds; but there we go again, with »sweeping«. Often as a creative writing tutor one is engaged with exactly that kind of observation – getting students to understand the metaphoric resonance in even the most passing fragment of linear, apparently literal text. Stop! One must also sometimes cry that in workshop when all this recourse to metaphor goes too far; for this way madness lies, turning over the stable platform called for elsewhere.

Dialogue

In terms of dialogue, the main metaphor identified was that of air, as follows: »It does not help that the dialogue you do have is not indented, so we do not feel the aeration (literally, the breath of life, the sound that is at the core of language) the text requires.« This injunction is important as dialogue is significantly the only time in prose when story time and reading time are aligned, so given some divergence of context (a character who is jogging in the park, say, which is more likely than a reader who is doing the same), writer, character and reader may be breathing at more or less the same pace; again we return to this question of the body.

On this subject it is, more prosaically, also worth remarking that the misapprehension of dialogue conventions is a clear sign that the learning outcomes of a course have not been absorbed by a student. Often it is simply worth persuading students to read dialogue aloud in pairs or groups – getting them to appreciate the sensory feel of words on their lips and their air which is powering

the utterance. As a practice, this helps to inculcate the concept of voice in the novel as much as improve the authenticity of dialogue exchanges.

Time and place

The main metaphoric drift here is towards ideas of separation and continuity, as the marker tries to convey the thorny issue of how humans experience time and the various ways in which this might be represented in narrative sequence. This often relates to more local details of sentence structure, perhaps showing how questions of tense or clausal relation (partly a matter of the spatial as well as the temporal), relate to wider considerations of time within fiction. For instance:

While the junctures between time series in the story are well handled, you have a time error on page 5 (»Meanwhile when«). There are a number of places where the grammar falls down, including a basic subject/object relation on page 4, »Known for taking his students on fieldtrips to see productions on Broadway, Professor Dunbar's classes were the first to fill up …« this means that the class is taking the class to Broadway. There is a similar problem with »Smoking alone under a magnolia tree the next day, it looked as if she was standing …« (page 10).

Temporal and spatial transitions are often the first things to be picked up in a workshop, as the following example shows:

There are some problems with junctures between time frames. For example, it's not entirely clear what the time status of the material from the bottom of page 3 up to page 12 is: I am assuming all the first day, in which case it's a bit confusing to have the summary material (»We had been in Delhi two days . . . We had been to Nizamuddin each day…«) above; not too hard to fix, though.

Largely, feedback responses in this field are concerned with the danger of confusion, and in the following response we see once again the issue of overspill into another element of fiction, in this case that of being and character:

As I explain above I think the active combination of present and past without signalling division is too challenging. It appears to exploit the gaps between different modes of being: doing, wishing, hoping, regretting etc. – as if all of these are contained in one time.

Place also exerts its singular authority in fiction; perhaps much more forcefully than time, given the primacy of scene within realist fiction and the fact that it is

easier to write two times at once than it is to write two places at once. But these are in themselves not discrete questions. We know from the history of science about interpenetrative relationships between time and place, and the use of »tumble« and »slip« in the following excerpt seems to suggest that something of this nature is foremost in the marker's mind:

At present your practice is to have a tumble back from memory (present frame) into a new chapter in which we explore the old Zahid material. This is fine, but all you need to do is set it up for the first few chapters, then you can slip back without the link, as otherwise the link can seem too forced, as it does from time to time.

In the next excerpt, we once again see how sensory detail, the body in general, condition the feedback response, along with a philosophical reference that itself points across time to a potential conclusion for the present investigation (though the matter is much more complex than I suggest in the feedback):[11]

Ah Chobham, site of all villainy. This is excellent work, its virtues principally driven by a very good grasp of physical detail, from the »smug thump« of the Chellews' doors and windows (page 3) to the »torpedo shape« of Clare's duvet (page 10). Physicality conditions much of your imagery, too, and that's good (Heidegger argued that transference between the non-sensuous and the sensuous was what powered good metaphor). But now and then I felt your imagery should be more verbal, as indeed it is in »air the cruel hangover« (page 4) and »tickled the skin« (page 9).

Another aspect of place, which also relates to the reader's view of page as mentioned above, is involved in the observation that »the way you handle views and eye-lines is very interesting, as is the introduction of a perimeter threat.« The remark highlights a juncture between point of view, place and dramatic structure.

Metaphors of separation and continuity also bear back on the novel's concern with the individual and the group, and the subject and alterity. At the level of surface text and grammar, the function of punctuation, commas in particular, and clausal separation more generally can be used to elucidate some of these points.

11 | See Nowell Smith, David: Sounding/Silence: Martin Heidegger at the Limits of Poetics, New York: Fordham University Press 2013.

Dramatic structure

The main observation for this element of fiction involves tightness and slackness, shape and formal looseness, as below:

Overall, there is just not enough shape and development in the piece – there's a slackness in it, a lack of form, and the subject matter is not in itself that interesting. There are many occasions on which it repeats action to no good end, i.e. telling us the club was »hell« on both pages 1 and 4, or with the reheated reflection about being late, at the top of page 2. The scene setting and dramatic definition is good – this has been a massive area of improvement for you, if you don't mind me saying. The one exception was Chapter 6, in which the Preeti Booaa stuff and wider family material gets in the way of the baithak/Shouty Chacha scene. This is the old problem of scene edge versus summary/exposition we two have so long discussed. There is a rising sense of drama in the real, semi-buried scene but it needs to be clearer.

Note »semi-buried«, perhaps suggesting the well-defined scene has been covered over by verbiage. One way to disinter the scene from its shallow grave is to encourage the student to separate the dramatic element from other elements at play in a given scene, isolating dramatic function in the abstract before trying strategies to actualize it. So: »It's a good beginning in narrative terms, but by pp.9-11 the pace has slackened too much. Similar problems exist on pp.21-22, pp.26-27 and p.44. You need to constantly ask yourself, what are the dramatic (as to opposed to other) functions of this scene?« Often the metaphor »edges of the scene« is used, which relates to both »stable platform« above and to the time and place topic more generally.

Character and consciousness

Here we are ever more squarely in the domain of the physical and here too we see reference to a master-craftsman text:

This is strong, powerful material – it needs a bit of work but overall I was impressed. There is, throughout, good depiction of physical detail, one of the key factors in governing reader response. The physical details are a hallmark of realism, producing what Henry James called »solidity of specification«.

Sensory data and the phenomenological are important aspects here, as again is dynamism:

While bodily matter is mainly well conveyed (i.e. »the half-boiled chicken« page 8), we need a fair bit more material conveying the movement and noise of the train itself and (as part of that) what he sees out of the window, when it's not fogged up. More glimpses, generally, as with the boot etc. on page 8.

Often a tutor will encourage students to reduce the number of characters and here again a term from mathematics dominates (»dimensionality«):

It's good that the Chinese-inscribed porn star satisfies my wish that she comes into the story, as I see from your note. But you need to beware having too many characters. You may need a non-human observational collecting device of some sort: a camera? Nikolai's cat? Something, anyway, to reduce the complex dimensionality which deepens with each new character. I am not sure you need the Litvinenko material (page 24); we know this type of story, and the historically real can sometimes work like an alienation effect.

In contrast to the advice given with respect to dramatic structure (identifying and isolating the function of a scene), with character and consciousness there is a sense of this element touching and reconfiguring all elements, no doubt because with most novels the human is at the centre of the system (though that may be changing with the development of new types of writing that try to orient more to the wider eco-system).

The following excerpt gives a sense of the issues at stake, showing how larger concerns beyond the text and many of the elements of fiction that control it, all collapse into a nexus of the writer, reader and character consciousness:

I think this question of the novel's approach to the questions of individuation and universality is a key one at the moment as writers struggle to dramatise universal or near universal global problems. Of course, writers of the past have done this against a Victorian backdrop, in which people thought myths were universal, and a later psychoanalytical one in which people began to see patterns across human psychology, and indeed a more contemporary one where identity politics powerfully affects ideas of both self and group. It is important to remember the historical aspects of all this. And in a more local sense, the desire to be self or part of group is also time-dependent, dialectical as I suggest in my comments on p8. The viewpoint character is important in guiding us how to read, how to see, even as we watch her/him through the prism of our own self. In that way, reading universalizes us, perhaps.

The focus on time in these (admittedly rather generalizing) observations is itself worth remarking on, perhaps suggesting that, alongside the sensuous body, the temporal is the most powerful frame of reference in advice given by this writer to creative writing students. We might speculate on why this might

be so, offering two tentative answers. One answer is that the creative writing tutor is constantly encouraging the student to be aware of both past time and future time, not only including previous exemplars of creative practice but also the evanescent permutations of consciousness at play within composition and reading. Acts of imagination as well as recollection, these include the next stage of the novel and indeed the finished state of the novel, which in workshop tends only to exist in idealized form.

The second tentative answer is contradictory to the first, insofar as the plethora of bodily metaphors and the push to the sensuous are »explicitly anti-idealist«.[12] The aim and purpose of this rising up of the body within creative writing feedback may be the same as its likely aim and purpose in fictional prose itself, which is to bring us closer to a state of being in which the sensuous and the nonsensuous are undivided. This conjoined state is one which may only ever exist when language is being sounded in our heads, creating new worlds both in composition and reception. At any rate, it is inalienably real to me as a writer and reader, even as its very possibility is something of which philosophy and other discourses besides creative writing are often at pains to disabuse us.

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