Persons of Letters: Creative Writing and Internationalizing the English Curriculum

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I BEGIN with the disclaimer that I feel very much out of place as a writer of novels, short stories, and belletristic essays to be chairing—even as an interim for two years—a PhD-granting English department, much less one as big as many small liberal arts colleges. I’ve often felt like the hapless accountant George Spelvin, a character thrust onto a stage without knowing any lines in an ever-shifting mixture of classical roles in Christopher Durang’s edgy farce The Actor’s Nightmare. Unlike George, I’m fairly sure of my lines, but I have had to learn everything about accounting.

For most of my career, I’ve been a builder of creative writing programs. At Syracuse University, where I taught until 1991, there was an established MA in English with Creative Writing track that, in a team effort with the immensely talented writers Stephen Dobyns, Tobias Wolff, and Mary Karr, I converted into an MFA degree that extended requirements for the serious study of literature and theory to augment its already excellent reputation as a writers’ workshop. Part of the impetus for making this change was our perception that creative writing students generally had not read nearly enough, and they certainly weren’t being prepared adequately for careers in the academy.

Since then, at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), I’ve been cofounder and principal author of the curriculum for a model creative writing program that includes a requirement for international experience. Our vision was to use an international focus to invent a new kind of creative writing program, one that, in its unusual curricular shape, might help counter an endemic solipsism then pervasive in the creative writing biz, or the po-biz, as so many of us started calling it, summed up well when the poet Dana Gioia (soon to step down as the director of the National Endowment for the Arts) analyzed the state of poetry in the introduction to his polemical Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture (1–23). The UNLV Creative Writing Program has just capped off its first decade with news that both its degree tracks—the MFA International and the Schaeffer Fellowship PhD with Creative Dissertation—were ranked in the July 2007 issue of the Atlantic in top five categories nationally (Delaney, “Where Great Writers” 85, 87), and the MFA among the top nine in the country in the November-December issue of Poets and Writers (Delaney, “Nine Distinctive Writing Programs” 87). Both publications are esteemed for monitoring the pulse of developments in the field.

In the early 1990s, when we began developing this new program, many of us perceived a dull sameness in work we were reading that was emerging from the MFA programs—art summed up in the 1980s by the poet and critic Donald Hall as the McPoem or the McStory (see Hall; McIrvin 91). The famed University of Iowa Writers Workshop staged the Raymond Carver write-alike contest as a satire of this trend in American fiction set in the bedroom, in the living room, around the kitchen table, at the backyard barbecue, in the car (usually in a state of menacing breakdown), or at the lunch-hour tryst. We were reading too many stories written in styles unadorned by figurative language, stories inhabited by characters who were boozy, bourgeois failures with run-up credit cards, plagued by bad marriages, furtive affairs, divorces,
sex without love, and on and on—stifling domestic fiction. In poetry, we were seeing pedestrian even if competently crafted poems about cracks in vases or the savory aromas of basil in pesto or too many banal sexual encounters, or poems with a predictably postmodern obfuscation of language written with the words arranged like shotgun pellets scattered onto way too much white space on the page. This domesticated sameness resulted not only from workshops Carver imitations but also from young writers trying to imitate the inimitable Tobias Wolff, as well as Anne Beattie, Bobbie Ann Mason, Richard Ford, Andre Dubus, and other so-called new realists prominent in that era. In poetry, it was a vanguard of undereducated youths armed, it seemed, either with The Collected Poems of William Stafford or—from the other side of the po-biz—with Marjorie Perloff’s essays, which were later refined into Against Indeterminacy, and precious little else. In sum: we perceived a baleful uniformity in MFA program writing afflicting American letters with an insular dullness.

The critic and editor Ted Solotaroff, in his 1986 essay “The Literary Campus and the Person of Letters,” perhaps best articulated the distressing marketplace trends of the “widening gulf” between the publishing business and “literary/intellectual culture” (264)—trends simultaneous to the movement of books almost entirely into the shopping malls of America. Whether or not these two shifts in culture were directly related, it seemed that, hand in hand with this often critiqued mass-market commercialization of the book business came disturbing developments in the academy—the “growth industry” of creative writing programs in English departments and a strange conundrum that Charles Newman wrote about in his remarkable The Post-modern Aura: in the American academy “both the critical and aesthetic intelligence often relinquish their traditional claims, preferring to explore what they imagine to be the richness of their own limitations” (qtd. in Solotaroff 270).

In the creative writing biz, Solotaroff attributed these developments to “the privatism and insularity of the campus-based writer,” with the net effect that “the creative writing industry becomes in part a curious division of the consumer economy, academic branch, promoting not the culture of letters but the culture of narcissism” (269, 273). Evidence that insularity and narcissism in American writing are still a cultural and controversial issue arose recently when the Nobel Prize jury member Horace Engdahl stated, “The U.S. is too isolated, too insular. They don’t translate enough and don’t really participate in the big dialogue of literature. That ignorance is restraining.” The Swedish Academy permanent secretary also said that United States writers are “too sensitive to trends in their own mass culture,” dragging down the quality of their work (Rising and Italie).

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum alludes to similar quality issues in humanities curricula generally, resulting from the so-called culture wars and the conflicts between theory and traditional literary studies in the 1990s. By “traditional,” I believe she means Brit Lit and American Lit specialties in our English curricula, in the main based on historical periods. We had these specialties along with their strange, undisciplined twins, those roll-your-own programs of study demanding some set core requirements after which students choose from a Whitman’s sampler of upper-division specialty themes courses offered up like an abundant dessert tray after a basic meat-and-potatoes meal.1 These curricular entities were in a condition of open warfare in the academy against the then-new, mainly theoretically based, gender-charged, ethnically thematic, and politically barbed poststructuralist approaches that were emerging during the same tumultuous era. Nussbaum reminds us how, even while we cultural warriors were so savagely battling one another, we were so uniformly at peace with our careerism in between the ravages of our curricular campaigns.

As antidote to these trends, Solotaroff advocated what he called the persons-of-letters program, one that would prepare students not so much in subject fields, not as English majors or creative writing MFAs, but rather for a life in letters. The program he outlined included traditional canonical literature studies as well as literary theory. Writers, and indeed all graduate students, should be versed enough to teach in depth the work of at least twenty-five authors. A person of letters would not only master one primary genre, such as fiction or poetry, or a historical period or critical field but also develop capacities and techniques for writing the review, the literary essay, the editorial, the letter for publication, the considered memoir, the play, the screenplay, the magazine feature, the interview, and various works of belles-lettres in addition to the scholarly essay. The point of such a
program is a focus on versatility and at least the attempted mastery of many forms of writing and interpretation. The person of letters should be able to read and write competently in at least two, preferably three, languages.

Solotaroff was a remarkable intellectual, a product of the intense scholarly hazing of the vaunted critical school dominant at the University of Chicago during the late 1950s. He died this past August, at the age of eighty. Though his career was primarily as an editor, first at Commentary, then as the creator of the revolutionary New American Review, then later as a book editor at Harper and Row—cum-HarperCollins, he was at the same time a highly accomplished writer with a broad reach and mastery of many genres and forms. For a new kind of MFA program, it seemed to me that the persons-of-letters model suggested by Solotaroff could impel a radical change in curriculum based on experiences, both in and out of the classroom, that could be offered to students. The ideology of a persons-of-letters program presents an opportunity to venture beyond the insular confines of the conventional creative writing workshop, an opportunity for creative writing students and by extension for students enrolled in any of the standard models of English literature curriculum. For creative writers, this program implies a close mentoring process toward more individually tailored study tracks, which should have as their primary goal a guided transformation of the artist from a student with no small measure of talent and willing to accept the requisite heavy doses of hard work and discipline into the artist who, in addition to being talented and hardworking, produces works of interesting art—art that looks beyond any solipsistic orientation. For a person of letters, stoically and crucially, the payoff of such a broad education is not so much a lucrative career in any marketplace as the high quality of the art that he or she makes; and it is, even more important, an improvement in the person’s quality of life.

At UNLV, through the 1990s, the English department chair Christopher Hudgins and I, along with the novelist Richard Wiley, who was the other principal cofounder of our program, worked together as a team. We had the help of visiting writers—Robert Stone, Toby Olson, Wole Soyinka, Bob Shacochis, Ana Castillo, Alica Steinberg, Irene Vilar, and others—whom we were able to bring to campus to brainstorm with us about how best to build a persons-of-letters program with creative writing at its core. Finally, after six years, we came up with a curriculum of more than fifty pages for a fifty-four-credit degree track leading to the MFA international degree. For most students, work toward the degree would be spread out over three years.

One of the design principles of this program calls for individualized study tracks and mentoring, providing great leeway for choice while at the same time enforcing a core of basic requirements. The requirements are divided, essentially, into three different areas: workshops; directed courses in technique, called forms classes; and literature and theory. Admission is currently restricted to fiction writers and poets, but a writer admitted in one genre is required to take at least one workshop in the other genre, and we strongly recommend as well a forms course with an emphasis in the other genre. In special cases, students can substitute a class in a genre such as playwriting or nonfiction writing. Required also is the production of a critical essay, a scholarly paper meant to be a kind of mini master’s thesis, mentored as an independent study by a scholar on our faculty. An important innovation of our program is the production of a literary translation, most often completed in the third year. Usually the student translates two or more stories or a cycle of poems, or the equivalent in nonfiction. This project is mentored by a faculty member from our department or from another department in the university fluent in or familiar enough with the source language.

The most unusual requirement in our program, which has generated so much notice, making our MFA degree the only one of its kind in the nation, are the six credits of international focus, for which a student must reside abroad in a non-English-speaking country for at least a semester or an equivalent time (for example, this term can be spread out into two trips for some students). The point of the experience-abroad requirement is not so much to fulfill any strictly academic goal as to encourage young writers to cross, culturally and physically, their domestic American boundaries so as to break away from creative insularity. Typically, at the beginning of the second year, students write a proposal for a research project or type of experience abroad, which can be scholarly, creative, or personal. It can be almost any kind of adventure, as long as students present a coherent
proposal in support of their development. The international focus requirement is also meant to teach students how to apply for outside and internal funding for a proposal, because grant writing for self-support is an essential survival skill for any artist. With careful mentoring, we’ve been able to help students find funding for about 65% of the full semester-abroad experience, on average, over the ten years since our program first started admitting students. Finally, after returning from the experience abroad, students write and defend the MFA thesis in fiction or poetry, which should be a book-length manuscript of publishable quality in the opinion of the faculty.

Combined with the literary translation component and individualized mentoring, the international focus requirement has been a tremendous success; and, as we had anticipated, it is influencing student writing toward more global subjects and relevance. The range of student experiences is astonishing. We’ve certainly had many who attended traditional studies-abroad consortium programs at universities in Spain, France, Germany, Italy, and so forth; but we’ve also had a Fulbright researcher who spent a year in Romania, and students on fellowship studies in Brazil and Costa Rica. One student worked for the National Park Service of Croatia, building feeding stations for the endangered brown bear in the Dinaric Mountains. Students have attached themselves to archaeological digs in France and are planning to do so elsewhere. Another student worked nine months for a British NGO in Thailand dedicated to the rescue of underage sex workers from the infamous Thai sex bar and brothel underworld. Students have engaged in very diverse activities. Two are right now combining teaching basic English and practicing technical rock climbing in Botswana, and one has just returned from running a printing press in Russia.

The international focus is all about students’ engaging in an act of imagination to design an experience that is self-enriching and that also reinforces the concept of becoming a citizen of the world, which Martha Nussbaum writes about so eloquently in Cultivating Humanity. Currently we have a student who plans to learn Navajo on the Shiprock Reservation. Another student is considering a proposal to research the use of Gaelic in plays in Ireland. In our brainstorming at the beginning, we decided that study on a Native American reservation should be considered as an international experience and that Ireland qualifies as a non-English-speaking country.

I could go on and on about the innovations over the past decade in the writing, also in the narrative and poetic techniques, that have come from the combination of international experience and literary translation as a means for students to engage the other and incorporate that engagement into many and various new stories and poems. Through Richard Wiley, a Peace Corps alumnus, our MFA program linked with the Master’s International program of the Peace Corps. Students may join the Peace Corps on admission, study at UNLV for two years, go off for their training and in-country placement for the next two years, then return to defend a thesis in a fifth year. We also have drawn to our program a few returning Peace Corps volunteers, for whom we waived the international focus requirement on admission (see Educational Benefits). One student rocked babies in his arms for a year in an orphanage in Romania, another lived in a tent in the middle of Mongolia and taught English as a second language, another taught English in Uzbekistan, and another worked with agricultural outreach in the Bikal-speaking region of the Philippines.

This international focus, combined with literary translation into a core of literary studies and more traditional workshops, has been essential to the success of our MFA program. We believe the quality of the writing is quite high, considering the more than seventy stories and poems published, four novels, seven books of poems, and more than twenty literary translations (see “College”; Cloud). The effect on the culture of the department and the college has been to build new relationships. We formed common cause with the Department of Foreign Languages on cross-listed courses in translation and translation theory and on mentoring literary translations; we felt a new impetus to pursue interdisciplinary work between the College of Liberal Arts and the College of Fine and Performing Arts. In the core curriculum, we’ve seen a trend in our English department toward more close study of comparative literature, even if titled differently, as forms classes, and more recently in the direction of postcolonial studies.

Still, the best effect of the program overall has been its push toward encouraging students to engage in the kind of Socratic self-examination that will transform their characters, stimulating the
formation of kosmopolites—citizens of the world. This cosmopolitan awareness, this “shattered mirror” approach, as the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah terms it (1–12)—fuelled by the desire of students to return to tell their stories and sing their songs in the hothouse atmosphere of the workshop—generally deflates narcissism and promotes the stoic stance of a Diogenes (in Appiah’s sense of stoicism) toward traditional education. Our goal is to shape writers and scholars who are able to stand outside their lives, becoming exiles from their previous existence. This ability furthers the originality and freshness of their writing.

New directions are developing in our department’s mission. In Freshman Composition, for example, a library search of recent studies yields at least thirty new arguments for internationalizing the composition and rhetoric curriculum in order to cultivate global awareness. In English Composition 102, about 20% of the core writing our instructors choose to work with in class is literary translation. In the second course of World Literature—a two-course offering divided by period, usually at the Restoration—about 70% of the reading is translated, nonanglophone work. The implications for strategic planning in our department are growing clearer. A new postcolonial studies full professor and fellow was hired in the fall of 2007, and we expect to hire new faculty members in ethnic studies, including Jewish studies and Asian studies, in order to build on our already established bases in Latin American and Native American literature. This international and multiethnic reach has a strong local justification. Las Vegas is increasingly a global center and example of multiethnicity: of the thirty-nine million visitors each year, one-sixth is from countries other than the United States, which makes the city one of the most international in the world (“Stats”).

Another strong argument for internationalizing the English curriculum, and for continuing to model the persons-of-letters program based in literary studies, derives from the future of the English language. English seems to absorb readily, with little discrimination, elements of other languages. A small but vivid example of this capacity is given in Christopher Towne Leland’s excellent The Art of Compelling Fiction, a sentence spoken by a New York City apartment dweller complaining about her neighbors, a couple she can hear arguing through the walls each night: “She’s a diva, and he’s a macho poseur—all that kvetching over a pair of khaki mukluks on the futon” (63).

Leland’s sentence is a bit over the top but makes perfect sense in English despite its unabashed incorporation of Italian, Spanish, French, Yiddish, Hindu, Inuit, and Japanese, the foreign words held together by stocky Anglo-Saxon prepositions hung on the bare bones of an idiomatic English grammatical structure. In this example, it would be fair to state that the other has been appropriated.

Six years ago, I shared this sentence at a presentation by Jacques Derrida at the University of California, Irvine, arguing with him that English is a sponge of a language that devours all others, perhaps even with a dangerously colonizing assault. The bemused Derrida merely stated, “Ah, very good . . . you see now how the other is subverting English.”

Derrida writes that, before the deconstruction of Babel, “the great Semitic family was establishing its empire, which it wanted universal, and its tongue, which it also attempted to impose on the universe.” In the margins is a new reading of the popular interpretation that God destroys the tower to punish the hubris of human beings attempting to deify themselves by a construction high enough to reach the heavens. Instead, God casts humankind into a confusion of tongues for the greater sin of attempting to conquer the world with a single dominant language (220–21). The internationalizing of the English curriculum is not only the responsible move to make but also one that absolutely must be made to keep up with the evolution of our language. What hangs before us all now is the question of translation—essential to the survival of our discipline and, I believe, to the future of reading and interpretation. How is it that we in the academy have so consistently turned our back on translation as a work of both scholarship and art? How have we allowed literary translators to be so often relegated to second-class-citizen status in the academy, especially for purposes of tenure and promotion? Why do we privilege so-called original research and scholarship when so much of what we are teaching relies now on translated works? Why doesn’t every self-respecting English department seek actively to house a member (or more) in good standing of the American Literary Translators’ Association (ALTA) along with so many of us who belong to the MLA and the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP)?

The question of translation—including theories and methods of its practice and use—will become
the most important scholarly issue that we face in the twenty-first century. Much of the new direction in English studies will rely on how we answer the question of translation. Our answers will determine not only how but also whether we preserve and cultivate the humanities by teaching persons of letters who become citizens of the world.

Notes

1. The term roll-your-own is an exaggeration, based on the title of courses regularly offered by Vance Bourjaily at the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop in the 1970s.

2. Solotaroff’s list of publications includes at least twelve major books, of which nine are edited collections drawn from contemporary literature and culture and two are original memoirs, and he wrote one novel. His major essays and reviews, too numerous to list, span five decades.

3. The keyword search is International Composition, Internationalizing Composition. Articles are most consistently featured in MELUS and Pedagogy.

Works Cited


Creative writers take risks and persevere. Creative writers are observant of the world.

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