



NEW DIRECTIONS IN BOOK HISTORY

# Writing Manuals for the Masses

The Rise of the Literary Advice Industry  
from Quill to Keyboard

*Edited by*

Anneleen Masschelein · Dirk de Geest



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# New Directions in Book History

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Anneleen Masschelein · Dirk de Geest  
Editors

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## PREFACE

Although Belgium to this day does not have an M.F.A. program in creative writing, the writing scene is flourishing. While neither of us harbors any literary ambitions, we have both been energized by giving literary advice. Dirk has been teaching poetry writing and creative writing classes in the 1980s, and Anneleen enjoys working as a story editor for the film industry when she has the time. These “serious leisure” activities broadened our minds to the world of literary advice, which we subsequently explored in two research projects. One project, “Literature between Creativity and Constraint: The Case of Handbooks for Creative Writing,” was part of Literary and Media Innovation (LMI), a broad Interuniversity Attraction Pole program funded by Belspo, Belgian Science Policy. The program consisted of a consortium of four Belgian research groups, MDRN (University of Leuven), CLIC (University of Brussels), CRI (University of Louvain-la-Neuve), and CIPA (University of Liège), and two international research groups, Project Narrative from the University of Ohio and Figura from the University of Montreal. We would like to thank all the members of the consortium for four stimulating years, especially Jan Baetens, who was the mastermind behind it all, and whose intellectual generosity is without compare. We also would like to thank the researchers on the project, Heidi Peeters and Arne Vanraes, as well as the colleagues from another project in the program, with whom we closely collaborated on “The Literary Interview”: Stéphanie Vanasten, Christophe Meurée, and David Martens. For our research, we

have received invaluable feedback from Julia Watson, Jim Phelan, Angus Fletcher, and the participants of the Project Narrative Summer School in Ohio in 2015, especially Pedro Ponce who pointed out Andrew Levy's book to us. Anneleen has fond memories of a shopping spree for a suitcase full of second-hand writing handbooks with Julia Watson in Ohio. Julia's hospitality, friendship, and support to this project have been invaluable. We also received a project grant from FWO, the Research Fund of Flanders for the project "Paperback Writer: A Comparative Study of Normative Poetics in American and French Handbooks for Writing Narrative Prose in the twenty first Century" which funded the Ph.D. research of Gert-Jan Meyntjens as well as this book. A number of other people have helped us along the way. Jim Collins and Mark McGurl both came to Leuven, respectively for the Hermes Summer School and for an international seminar in the MLS program. This led to unexpected encounters, graciously hosted by Ilke Froyen at Passa Porta, which have made their way into this book, and to very useful bibliographical information about the world of self-publishing. The cooperation with Bozar's Are You Series festival helped us to explore the world of screenwriting manuals and allowed us to invite Bridget Conor, Ian MacDonald, and Vincent Colonna, who shared their knowledge of handbooks in the film industry with us. Anneleen would also like to thank Jean-Michel Rabaté for his unwavering support in the past years and the colleagues of cultural studies who have supported this research in very busy times. Most of all, though, we are grateful to all the contributors to this book. Some of the authors in this book we've known and worked with for many years have become friends. But we've contacted the majority of the scholars on the basis of their research, and in many cases, we have not yet had the chance to meet in person. Their expertise has made the book possible and it was a truly pleasurable experience working with all of them. Finally, we would like to thank Jenny Herman for her help in editing this volume, at very short notice, and for bringing us into contact with Andrés Franco Harnache, who brought another piece to the puzzle. Last but not least, Anneleen would like to thank her parents and sisters, and her partner Laurens, for helping with editing and especially for being a wonderful plus parent to Elliot.

Leuven, Belgium

Anneleen Masschelein  
Dirk de Geest

**Acknowledgments** We would like to thank Belspo, Belgian Science Policy, and FWO Flanders for funding the research for this book and making it available to the public in Open Access.



## PRAISE FOR *WRITING MANUALS FOR THE MASSES*

“This exciting and comprehensive range of essays assesses the contribution of advice handbooks to prose writing, conceived variously as practice, creative self-expression, and mode of self-construction for literary or pop-culture marketplaces. In a field that tends to celebrate developing ‘authentic’ autobiographical expression, the contributors’ focus on not only describing but probing, and in some cases questioning, the advice in writing handbooks is a provocative intervention in life narrative studies.”

—Julia Watson, *Professor Emerita, The Ohio State University, USA*

“A fascinating study of ‘how to write,’ a fundamental trend in literary culture that has longtime remained under the radar, bringing together key aspects of the meaning of literature in society, far beyond the individual needs or desires of all those eager to start writing and end up publishing. It combines careful historical reconstruction of literary advice and smart contextualization of the advice culture in its informal as most business oriented models, unearthing many aspects of the blurring of boundaries between professional and amateur, reader and writer, individual and community, workshop and market, that profoundly reshape our thinking on the institution of literature.”

—Jan Baetens, *Professor of Cultural Studies, University of Leuven, Belgium*

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction: Literary Advice from Quill to Keyboard

*Anneleen Masschelein*

### INTRODUCTION

The “writing advice industry” is one of the most enigmatic and, until recently, most overlooked areas of literature. Christopher Hilliard coined the term to indicate a number of different services offered in the early twentieth century to amateur writers and aspiring authors, handbooks<sup>1</sup> as well as “other commercial dispensers of advice: writer’s magazines more analogous to the hobby press than to literary reviews; correspondence schools; and manuscript criticism and placement-advice services or ‘bureaus’” (Hilliard 2006, p. 20). Today, there is still a large array of practices on offer, ranging from commercial how-to books to creative writing manuals and textbooks, highly specialized volumes addressing specific aspects of a text or a genre (such as beginnings, middles, and ends (Kress 2011) or an encyclopedia of poisons for detective writers (Stevens and Klarner 1990)), self-help books, therapeutic writing manuals, and writing memoirs, in which established authors mix autobiography from the vantage point of the writerly lifestyle with advice. Writing workshops

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are spreading across the globe, both inside and outside universities, and magazines about writing, both for amateurs and professionals, are widely available.

What truly boosted the advice industry is the Internet. The correspondence courses and manuscript advice services of the early days have moved online, as have the self-publishing venues. Amazon's Kindle Worlds, for instance, offers possibilities to publish on Kindle, in print and audio formats, leading to the emergence of what Nick Levey calls a "post-press literature" (Levey 2016; McGurl 2016). How-to treatises (self-published and others) are available to even the most inexperienced budding author to navigate this new world. Add to these writing communities like Wattpad and the oldest fanfiction community, fanfiction.net; writing support groups like Absolute Write Water Cooler or The Insecure Writers Support Group; writing blogs like Selfpublishing.com, Writer's Digest or Write to Done; podcasts such as Writing excuses, The Creative Penn, Australian Writers' Centre, and The Creative Writer's Toolbelt; YouTube tutorials and software for creative writers (e.g., Scrivener, Dramatica, and Save the Cat! Story Structure Software 4.0); and so on. To paraphrase Michelene Wandor's study of creative writing in Britain, *The Writer Is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else: Creative Writing Reconceived* (2008): The literary advice industry is very much alive and kicking, and continues to spread, leading us to wonder to what extent contemporary online and offline literary culture is being "advised."

Still, no matter how omnipresent, literary advice is, not unlike Wikipedia, often depreciated by "real" authors and literary professionals because of the reductive and stereotypical systems and theories it seems to promote. At the far end of the academic institution of creative writing, the industry is associated with a commercial genre circuit outside the confines of "Literature," with the formulas of Hollywood storytelling gurus, and with its big brother, the self-help or self-improvement industry. Advice authors are said to encourage amateurs who lack genuine talent to churn out memoirs, genre fictions, or fanfiction, in the hope of writing the next bestseller, of achieving stardom in a limited niche of the world wide web, or just some peace of mind by unloading their thoughts on paper or a blog. Apart from these popular connotations of literary advice—which, as we will see, do not do justice to the diversity of the phenomenon—the overtly prescriptive aims and normative poetics of literary advice sit uneasily with the attitudes fostered by academic literary studies, narratology, and serious literary criticism.

And yet, for all its self-effacing and disposable qualities, literary advice is frequently used by would-be and by established authors and critics, and it has left its traces not just in literature, but also in well-known narratological treatises.<sup>2</sup> As a popular form of poetics, literary advice constitutes the most democratic level of access to creative writing, which (regardless of whether it is valued as literature) is one of the most accessible forms of (self)expression, at a low cost of entry and open to ordinary experiences (Caughey 2016, p. 143). Literary advice embodies a practical, what Jerome Bruner calls an “interactionist” knowledge of literature, i.e., a knowledge that is acquired by doing. At the same time, it also perpetuates a seemingly self-evident set of norms, the “unmentionable reference” of literary doxa.<sup>3</sup> Or, as Andrew Levy put it in *The Culture and Commerce of the American Short Story* (1993), it is because the “axioms” codified in handbooks are “so central that the handbooks remain so invisible” (Levy 1993, p. 104). Like the school manuals studied by Pierre Bourdieu, literary advice—for all its repetitiveness, reductionism, and simplification—provides an unexpected insight into the residual, dominant, and even emergent trends of writing culture. Closely scrutinizing the field for the rise of new literary genres and trends, literary advice outlines the basic (and supposedly universal) components of a literary text. It also takes stock of the mores and customs of the literary world, and describes different authorial subject positions and myths that circulate in a given period and system, often in a very detailed manner (Grauby 2015). Moreover, a wide number of techniques and exercises to stimulate creativity, and overcome “fear of the white page” and “writer’s block,” literary advice also feeds the “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011) that a “good” writerly life (i.e., a successful literary career) is attainable for everyone who is willing to put in the work.

It is not surprising, then, that from the early 2000s onward, scholarly interest in literary advice has greatly increased within various subfields of literary studies: the study of nineteenth-century English and American literature, the history of creative writing (in the wake of disciplinary histories of English studies), book history, literary sociology, and cultural studies. Thus, handbook author Douglas Bement’s advice from 1931 turned out to be prophetic: If twenty-first-century literary scholars want to understand “the writing hysteria of the twentieth century” (Bement in Levy 1993, p. 77), literary advice might be a good place to start. At the same time, the growing body of research is dispersed, with a lot

of information in unpublished dissertations, in book chapters, and articles. Moreover, scholars focus predominantly on the early days of literary advice in the USA and in the UK. Although these traditions are not the same, they are to a large extent intertwined (as there was a lot of cultural exchange at the time). Moreover, the Anglo-American is generally considered to be the first, and, until today, dominant paradigm of commercial advice, all the more so because the international dissemination of the academic creative writing program as a model for fiction instruction and as a successful academic discipline of its own has turned many of its early premises into unquestioned “lore.”<sup>4</sup>

The aim of this book is to enlarge the scope of the scholarship, by bringing together historical analyses with studies of more recent forms of literary advice, and by relating it to some of the important scholarship in the field of creative writing. Moreover, we want to open up the research toward other advice traditions, in other cultures or in adjacent fields. The present chapter will outline the development of literary advice from its origins in the nineteenth century to the present, zooming in on important landmarks, discussing the types and contents of literary advice, and its tangential relation to literature. The narrative is roughly chronological, with occasional flash-forwards and flashbacks highlighting the remarkable consistency of literary advice, as well as indicating how certain tendencies have evolved in its history. This brief history is based on the existing scholarship: First of all, an important part of the history of the advice tradition has been unearthed, especially in the long nineteenth century, and in the interwar period. Secondly, various types and subgenres of advice, in different media, have been examined—magazines, letters, handbooks, correspondence schools, etc.—including the specific audiences they address. A third focus of scholarship is the content of the advice: What topics are treated, the rules and suggestions, advice for specific genres, the discourse and types of address, and the ideology behind it. Finally, there is some research on the relation between literary advice and literature, in parodies for instance, but also in novels.

## THE “ORIGIN” OF LITERARY ADVICE (ANTIQUITY–1846)

### *Preliminaries: From Classical Poetics to Professional Advice*

Instruction about literary genres and composition has been around since Antiquity. Aristotle’s *Peri Poetikès* (335 BC) is probably the most well-known treatise about writing until today. The (incomplete) text has influenced both the Western and the Arabic philosophical and poetic tradition, and gave its name to a genre of writings about writing literature: poetics. Aristotele’s *poetics* famously describes the existing genres of his time as well as the role of literature and the poet in society. It defines the constituent parts of genres and formulates the rules to which good literature must conform. A lot of the terminology is still used in literary studies today, for instance, *mimesis* (imitation), *catharsis* (purification of the emotions, especially pity and fear, through identification with the tragic hero), *hubris* (pride), *peripeteia* (reversal), and *ethos* (character). Other poetics from Antiquity, both in Greek and Latin, have been rediscovered and translated in various periods, influencing contemporary literary production and reflection. The manuscript of the anonymous essay “Peri Hupsous,” attributed to Longinus or Pseudo-Longinus (first century BC), for instance, was discovered in the tenth century. The essay discusses good literature and famously introduces the aesthetic notion of “the sublime”. A new English translation in the eighteenth century brought the text back into prominence and since then, it has been regarded as a precursor to the theories of the sublime by Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and François Lyotard. Quintillian’s *Institutio Oratio* (ca. 95 BC), a multi-volume Latin work on the theory and practice of rhetoric, remained highly influential from the Italian Renaissance until the eighteenth century, and was quoted by numerous European authors, from Petrarch, to Erasmus, Montaigne, and Alexander Pope, to name but a few. The most influential Classical treatise from Antiquity, besides Aristotle’s, is probably Horace’s *Ars Poetica* (19 BC). This epistolary poem about poetry and drama also introduced a significant number of literary terms, like *deus ex machina* (a god from the machine or an unbelievable sudden resolution), *in medias res* (starting the middle of things), *ut pictura poesis* (as is painting so is poetry), and *utile dulcique* (the combination of the practical and the aesthetic).

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, academies for national languages and literatures were founded all over Europe. They primarily sought to define the standard vernacular language, but also saw it as their



task to define the literary canon, and to act as judges in literary disputes and later on contests (Guillory 1987; English 2005).<sup>5</sup> Whereas popular playwright Lope de Vega pleaded for an update of the rules in his 1606-address to the academy of Madrid “El arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo” (New Rules for Making Plays in This Time), his French colleague Pierre Corneille circumscribed the three unities of place, time, and action (1660) in tragedy in a much stricter way than the rules issued by Horace. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the tradition of prescriptive poetics flourished in European literature. New translations of Aristotle and Horace were distributed widely after the invention of the printing press and were reinterpreted in different literary traditions. Literary creation was conceived in terms of imitation and emulation of existing canonical examples, and composition was regarded as a process that follows well-defined steps and rules. One of the most well-known French poetics of this period was Nicolas Boileau’s *L’Art poétique* (1674). In 1100 alexandrines, Boileau offers an overview of the writing process, the rules of poetry, and the hierarchical genre system.

The genre of the essay (named after Michel de Montaigne’s *Essais* [1572–1592]), both in prose and in verse form, was well-suited for reflections about writing, because it combined a poetical and a personal standpoint. In his didactic poem “An Essay on Criticism” (1711), for instance, Alexander Pope starts from the example of Horace and the Classical tradition of poetics to critically examine the contemporary state of literature, and to define the rules of good criticism. In the same period, Joseph Addison’s essay on “The Pleasures of Imagination” (1712) shows the gradual shift from defining strict, universal rules for good literature, to poets offering insight in the processes of literary creation, and examining the problems of imagination and fiction in the Enlightenment and Romantic period. In the early nineteenth century, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge further explored these issues in their metaphysical poetry, with chapter XIV of Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria; or Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions* (1817) introducing “the willing suspension of disbelief.” Somewhat later, adding to the rhetorical tradition of poetics, a rich Western tradition of self-reflexive, personal writings about writing and advice by “Great Authors”—from Wolfgang Goethe, to Charles Baudelaire, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Virginia Woolf, to name just a few examples—emerged which remains widely in print until today.

Although all these classics undeniably constitute the backdrop of the larger history of the phenomenon of literary advice, there is a crucial divide between the older tradition of poetics and literary advice, which has to do with the advent of modern capitalism and democracy as well as with the commercialization and professionalization of literature in the nineteenth century. Classical poetics were addressed and accessible to a relatively small, highly educated elite and deal with literature as art. Literary advice, by contrast, has a different target, and primarily caters to authors interested in writing literature as entertainment. When in the nineteenth century, due to the ongoing developments of the printing press, the commercial press took off in the Western world, this had an enormous impact on the demand for fiction. Shorter and serial formats of fiction were sought by journals, weeklies, and by literary or so-called “little” magazines. The concomitant democratization of education and rise of literacy had made reading and writing accessible to people from the middle and lower classes, and women, who did not have the cultural upbringing that traditional—white, male, and upper-class—readers and authors had hitherto enjoyed. These new groups of readers turned to new genres such as the gothic novel, romance, science fiction, mystery, horror, adventure, and erotic tales, that were associated with sensationalism and escapism. This type of fiction was mass-produced in the heydays of “pulp fiction,” named after the cheap pulpwood paper used for the magazines (Locke 2004, 2007), from the end of the nineteenth century until the Great Depression. This period coincided with the era of literary professionalism (Wilson 1985; for Britain, see Keating 1991), and with the first peak of literary advice.

The professionalization of authors was facilitated by both philosophical and legal changes. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, academies and salons brought together artists from various disciplines, constituting networks around patrons and stimulating artistic mentorship. For the visual arts, music, and dance, this led to the institutionalization of training in academies. The fact that such an institutionalized pedagogical system was much less established in the field of literature is usually explained by the individualism inherent in the Romantic conception and cult of the poet as genius. However, as Dawson points out, in the eighteenth century the concept of the poet as genius was also associated with the faculty of the “creative imagination” (Dawson 2005, pp. 29–32). This, paradoxically, enabled nineteenth-century authors to see writing not just

as a mysterious gift, accessible only to the happy few, but also as a vocation and ultimately a profession. The idea was strengthened by successive copyright acts in Britain and in the USA in the 1880s, which helped protect the authors' income derived from their work, and encouraged aspiring authors from diverse backgrounds to try their luck at writing. In the rapidly changing literary landscape, these authors were looking for guidance, not just about writing, but also about legal and economic matters. However, they faced a gap due to the lack of academies and other forms of professional education, for instance in universities or colleges. By the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, a newly formed class of literary "middlemen," who mediated between the aspiring author and the publishing industry—agents, editors, tutors, manuscript bureaus, and author societies—began providing literary advice as a commercial service.

*The Disputed Origin of Literary Advice: Edgar  
Allan Poe's "Philosophy of Composition"*

Before going into more detail about the golden age of the literary advice industry from the 1880s until the 1930s, it is worth taking a closer look at the origins of literary advice. These are generally situated in the first half of the nineteenth century, more precisely, in 1846, the publication date of Edgar Allan Poe's "Philosophy of Composition" in *Graham's Magazine*. "The Philosophy of Composition" is the "magazine paper" Poe himself had, in vain, been waiting for: "written by any author, who would – that is to say, who could – detail, step by step, the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion" (Poe 1846, p. 163). Dispensing with the Romantic myth of inspiration, Poe emphasizes how literature works with language in order to create maximum dramatic effect. According to Levy, the importance of this text for the ensuing literary advice tradition lies first and foremost in the scientific approach to writing adopted by Poe (Levy 1993, pp. 100–101). Although Poe's advice is based on a detailed technical description of the composition of one of his poems, "The Raven," the rational style of advice has been especially influential for advice about short stories, which are in Levy's view the first real target of literary advice, for two main reasons. Firstly, short stories are the most lucrative literary genre in the burgeoning magazine market. Secondly, because of its compactness, the genre is considered to be best suited for beginners.

In recent years, the “Philosophy of Composition” as *the* origin of the advice tradition has been qualified. As John Caughey demonstrates in this book, “The Philosophy of Composition” was not immediately successful in the US advice market, rather its canonization occurred belatedly. In fact, it was Brander Matthews, a literature professor at Columbia, who with his “Philosophy of the Short-story” (1885) “resurrected” the work of Poe. Matthews not only draws attention to short fiction as an American genre, outlining a straight lineage from Poe and Hawthorne, to the present,<sup>6</sup> but he also returns to Poe’s insights in composition, primarily the “unity of effect,” in order to define the short story as a self-contained whole (Levy 1993, p. 125). According to Caughey, in his dissertation *How to Become an Author: The Art and Business of Literary Advice Handbooks* (2016), literary critics in the early twentieth century—especially the New Critics—who wanted to enlarge their scope from poetry to prose, both recuperated and dismissed the “pre-theories” found in the earlier short story advice tradition from the mid-nineteenth century.

The dissertation of Paul S. Collins, *Imaginary Subjects: Fiction-Writing Instruction in America, 1826–1897*, traces the origins of the advice tradition further back, to 1826, by imagining what type of advice would have been available to the seventeen-year-old aspiring writer Poe (Collins 2016, p. 9). This leads him to uncover a number of eighteenth-century works on poetry and rhetoric, that were still available in the early nineteenth century, as well as various series of advice articles in magazines, directed not just toward budding authors in general, but to women in particular. In the 1830s already, Collins points out, there were how-to series about popular genres available, by Frederick Marryat, and by Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton. In the same year, 1838, Poe already published his first advice article in *American Museum*.<sup>7</sup> Collins goes on to map the mid-century marginal American advice scene, that consists of high school instruction manuals, university literary magazines, and early author manuals. This offer prefigures the advice industry proper which emerges at the end of the century with correspondence courses and writing schools offered to female writers, as Caughey also discusses in his contribution to this book. In a dissertation from 2013, *The Craft of Fiction: Teaching Technique, 1850–1930*, Mary Stewart Atwell studies the early stages of literary advice in British literature, bringing to the fore—among other things—another important early source of literary advice, i.e., the correspondences of established authors like Charles Dickens and Bulwer-Lytton with the (female) authors whom they mentored.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, in spite of the relative consensus among researchers about the origin of literary advice, this origin has been contested in two directions. Several scholars have shown how Poe's essay was very much embedded in an earlier tradition of poetics as well as in a much less visible practice of literary advice linked to the emerging market of literary journals. At the same time, the impact of Poe's essay has only been felt later, toward the end of the nineteenth century, mediated by other handbooks. Furthermore, in the scholarship, we find a later landmark for literary advice that is associated with the golden age of literary advice, the late nineteenth, early twentieth century, i.e., the debate between Sir Walter Besant and Henry James on "The Art of Fiction."

## THE ERA OF THE LITERARY ADVICE HANDBOOK

### *The Bifurcation of Literary Advice: "The Art of Fiction"*

Already in 1923, Fred Lewis Pattee dubbed the first decade of the twentieth century "the era of the short-story handbook" (Pattee in Dawson 2005, p. 62, see also Caughey in this book). A foundational event was a lecture on "The Art of Fiction" given by Sir Walter Besant—at the time a successful novelist and one of the founders of the British Society of Authors (1884) as well as editor of its mouthpiece, the professional magazine *The Author* (1891)<sup>9</sup>—at the Royal Institute in London in 1884. The publication of the lecture was followed by a response from Henry James, with the same title, which would, much later, eclipse not just Besant's original lecture in literary history, but also the many other voices that took part in the discussion. The intricacies and ramifications of "The Art of Fiction" are examined in great detail by Atwell and Caughey in this book. In a nutshell, the debate hinges on two different positions. According to Besant, fiction is an art on a par with other arts, and therefore, it can be taught, like music, painting, or sculpture. Subsequently, he lays out some rules to define good fiction. James, by contrast, responds that precisely because fiction is an art, there are no a priori rules that should or even can be taught, except for the notion that fiction should be interesting.

"The Art of Fiction" sparked a debate on whether fiction is an art, and therefore unteachable, or whether it is a craft, leading to a profession, which has continued into the present. It also marks the beginning of two traditions of literary advice. On one side, there is the scientific ethos found in what Locke and Caughey call "fictioneering": a body of

practical knowledge about the construction of a literary text from the point of view of the maker. This knowledge also extends to the more practical side of literature and getting published. Here, it is Besant who set the tone with *The Pen and the Book* (1900), a guide to publication and the customs of the literary world (that also includes some of his earlier writing advice). As Paul Vlitos shows in his chapter, focusing on handbooks in the British tradition, Besant was part of a flourishing British advice scene, where many handbooks of this type were available. At the other end of the spectrum, and increasingly opposed to the first type of advice, was the Jamesian tradition of handbooks, typically represented by Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* (1921). These handbooks focused on form and technique, and via their adoption by the New Critics later on, they evolved into the academic creative writing textbooks of the 1950s–1960s, exemplified by R. V. Cassill's *Writing Fiction* (1962).<sup>10</sup>

In the first decades of the twentieth century, however, these two types did not yet completely diverge, as Lubbock's title already indicated. Most short story handbooks were “mongrel textbooks” (Levy 1993, p. 80) for several reasons. First of all, they consisted of a mixture of older insights from poetics, rhetoric, and composition; definitions of contemporary genres; practical insights about writing offered by authors and the industry's middlemen, such as editors, publishers, and agents; and information about publishing, copyrights, and promotion. Secondly, they were written by very diverse authors, from established fiction authors, to scholars and professors, hacks or failed novelists, editors, and publishers. Thirdly, they addressed equally diverse audiences. Both in the UK and the USA, university students at prestigious institutions—American Ivy League universities that foster creative pedagogies, like Harvard and Chicago (Myers [1996] 2006; Collins 2016) and Oxford and Cambridge, that were introducing English literature in their curriculum (Wandor 2008; Caughey 2016)—were as interested in learning how to write, as middle- and lower-class authors, young girls and women, workers and soldiers (Hilliard 2006; Atwell 2013; Collins 2016). These aspiring authors could buy specialist magazines devoted to writing, but they would also find articles in more general publications.

*Form and Content of Literary Advice Handbooks  
from the Era of the Handbook and Beyond*

Levy provides the most elaborate description of the form and content of the advice handbooks from the late nineteenth, early twentieth century. Initially, handbooks were often collections of shorter pieces (articles, series, lectures, surveys, or interviews), which had been revised or republished several times (Levy 1993, p. 79). Later on, monographs that constituted a mixture of scholarly description and advice were devoted to specific genres, not just to the short story or novel, but also to popular genres such as the mystery (Masschelein and De Geest 2017), the photo- and radioplay. According to Levy,

(t)he short story handbook could justifiably be described as a literary form, where the author was expected to employ or respond to certain rhetorical and structural strategies. Most followed the example of Aristotle's *Poetics*, and contained a brief introductory section describing the history of the genre, followed by a larger body where the act of writing was divided into elements – plot, character, style, dictions, titles, and endings, et al. These books either invoked an academic pose [...] or were designed to appeal to business people, advertising personnel, and psychologists. (Levy 1993, p. 87)

He further explains that most handbooks began by establishing the author's authority and by positioning themselves in the debate between art and craft, navigating the contradiction that while everyone can write, publication and authorship are not for everyone. When describing the characteristics of a genre, the frequent use of examples reinforced the author's credentials as connoisseur of a genre.

With regard to the elements of fiction, Levy pays attention to the importance of plot models which were often visualized, a tendency that continues until today as Liorah Hoek shows in her chapter in this book. These plot models reflected both the scientific ethos of the handbooks and the emphasis on action, which can be traced back to the Classical inspiration of narrative theories. Paul Vlitos provides an in-depth analysis of the discursive elements found in nineteenth-century British handbooks in his chapter in this book. In our own research on mystery handbooks, we found that handbooks generally treated the writing process in terms of the different phases of the creative process described by Classical rhetoric: invention, arrangement, style, and delivery (Masschelein and de Geest

2017, p. 102). The first phase, invention, has to do with preparation, which can consist of reading, doing research, and using exercises to stimulate creativity. The second phase of arrangement entails the choice and elaboration of story elements, such as plot, character, setting, and point of view. The application of style is predominantly understood as positioning your work in relation to the conventions of a genre or subgenre. The final phase of delivery includes writing, revision, and rewriting. In addition to this, most handbooks, especially on the more commercial end of the spectrum, also devote some chapters to the market: finding an agent and a publisher, contracts and advances, preparing the manuscript, and in the case of publication, promotion of the book.

To anyone familiar with contemporary literary advice, it will be clear that much of this basic content of handbooks has remained constant since the late nineteenth century. A tension that marks both older and contemporary creative writing handbooks is that between the tendency to dehistoricize a limited conception of storytelling (Dawson 2008), on the one hand, and the handbooks' attunement to new trends and to local specificities of a genre, on the other hand (Masschelein and de Geest 2017). The universality of writing advice is perhaps most evident when looking at the limited number of adagios used to characterize creative writing pedagogy as a whole, "Show don't tell," "Write What You Know," "Find Your Own Voice," and "Read like a Writer."<sup>11</sup> Usually presented as timeless truths, these motto's are nonetheless of relative recent coinage. Many scholars attribute "Show don't tell" and the preference for action and dramatic storytelling over description to the influence of Flaubert and of realist poetics on early fiction theories (e.g., Dawson 2005, pp. 98–103; Griffith 2013). "Write what you know," or the importance of observation of daily reality, is alternatively traced back to Besant's "Art of Fiction," or to the teachings of innovative English Composition pedagogues, such as Barrett Wendell, who worked with "daily themes" in order to stimulate observation powers (Myers [1996] 2006, pp. 46–49). The third dictum, "Find your own voice," captures the importance of self-expression and voice in creative writing pedagogy, examined by Alexandria Peary in her chapter in this book. It is most often associated with the more self-help style of advice arising in the 1930s, which we will discuss in more detail below. In the eyes of many contemporary scholars, the phrase is related to a highly individualistic ethos that overemphasizes personal experience, at the expense of rewriting and craft (Wandor 2008, pp. 115–117), of more political forms of writing (Westbrook 2009), and even of fiction.



As Paul Dawson points out, in many handbooks voice conflates the notion of personal style and originality with “point of view” in New Critical and narratological theories of fiction (Dawson 2005, pp. 110–111)). A final cornerstone of “workshop poetics,” which Dawson attributes to Dorothea Brande (1934), is “Read like a Writer.” This motto must be regarded in opposition to “critical reading” and can have two meanings: reading in order to see how a text is constructed, or rereading your own material in view of revision (*ibid.*, p. 92).

In their study of late-twentieth handbooks for romance fiction, De Geest and Goris (2010) show how reading is a necessary preparatory phase of writing in which authors familiarize themselves with the constraints inherent in a genre. De Geest and Goris’s analysis of the normative discourse in popular handbooks for romance reveals how handbooks have to reconcile a strong emphasis on norms, related to genre and to the industry, which must be interiorized through reading, specific rules (do’s) and especially pitfalls to avoid (don’ts), with a more encouraging attitude, aimed at stimulating creativity within the constraints of a genre. Obviously, these constraints and some advice differ from genre to genre. In the field of mystery for instance, we found that one of the typical elements, which has remained fairly constant, is the concept of (fair) play: A mystery must be conceived as an intellectual puzzle that the reader must be able to solve, hence the importance of the right amount of clues (Masschelein and De Geest 2017). In handbooks for memoir, which have become very popular since the 1990s and the so-called “memoir boom,” other things are important. On the one hand, an exploration of the motives for memoir writing; on the other hand, an array of techniques and prompts to stimulate memory (Smith and Watson 2001, p 160). To this, we can add an emphasis on the possible ethical pitfalls of memoir.

One of the most notable changes in literary advice handbooks has to do with tone and layout. Most of the handbooks in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century appeared as bound monographs. In the twentieth century, the look of handbooks changed considerably, under the influence of trends in publishing, such as the popularity of the paperback in the UK, Germany, and France in the 1930s and somewhat later in the USA, and of front-list publishing (i.e., the rapid selling of cheap hardbacks) in the 1980s. In the commercial tier of the market, genre handbooks nowadays adopt a softcover textbook-style layout, with frames, bullet-points, and exercises, which coincides with a hands-on, colloquial, and motivational tone and a procedural structure: following the steps and the exercises

in the book will deliver a finished product. The shift in handbook titles from notions of “art” or “craft” in the first part of the twentieth century toward more active verbs like “writing” or “becoming” reinforces the activating dimension of handbook discourse (*ibid.*, pp. 101–103). Handbook covers feature either stereotypical writer’s attributes—from quill, to pen, typewriter, or notebook—or images that refer to typical genre elements, e.g., guns or magnifying glasses for detective handbooks, gothic fonts for thrillers, or spiraling pathways or winding roads for the memoir. As Françoise Grauby has shown in her study of French literary advice handbooks and in her chapter in the present book, these objects play an important role in what is in French discourse analysis called “authorial stances (*postures*),” i.e., images of authors that are both self-created by authors (in their works, interviews, and photographs), and attributed to them by other actors in the field (e.g., the media and publishers). Taken as a whole, authorial stances are part of a “scenography” of images, objects, places, and acts, which make it possible to conceive of yourself as an author in a given historical moment.

### THE EXPANSION OF THE LITERARY ADVICE INDUSTRY

As the century progressed, a number of new actors came on the scene (or took on a more prominent role), who have exerted a lasting influence until today. First of all, literary advice “moguls”—to use Caughey’s term—built “empires” of literary advice for a wide range of genres and differentiated audiences. Secondly, literary authors began incorporating advice in their often parodic sketches of the literary field of the period. Thirdly, women, who had been present from the very beginning of literary advice, played an increasingly prominent role in the industry, especially in relation to a third type of advice—besides the commercial fictioneering handbooks and the more academic “counterhandbooks” (Levy 1993, p. 88)—which arose in the 1930s, i.e., literary advice/self-help. Because the topic is too large to discuss encyclopedically, we will shift in our discussion between different advice cultures, the USA, the UK, and France. Although the exact development of advice cultures is obviously particular, we observe similar tendencies in these traditions.

### *Literary Advice Moguls*

One of the first publishers to turn advice into big business in the USA was Joseph Berg Esenwein, a minister and English teacher from Pennsylvania, who also wrote religious poetry. In the first decades of the twentieth century, Esenwein became the managing editor of several magazines: *Booklovers' Journal*, *Lippincott's*, the *Poetry Journal*, and *The Writer's Monthly*. He also set up the "Home Correspondence school" and "The Writer's Library," a series of handbooks for over a dozen genres or audiences (Levy 1993, p. 93). Esenwein himself authored and co-authored handbooks for poetry, the short story, the mystery, the photoplay, and public speaking, and lent his authority to the other books in his library by writing the prefaces. His *Writing the Short-Story: A Practical Handbook on the Rise, Structure, Writing, and Sale of the Modern Short-Story* (1909) epitomizes the "science-oriented ethos" of the early handbooks (ibid.) and contains an impressive repertory of the story handbooks of the time (ibid., p. 86). While this and other guides from Esenwein's catalog knew numerous reprints (and are still available in print-on-demand formats), it seems that by the 1920s Esenwein's empire was in decline. Besides some volumes on public speaking and writing good English, the last book he edited was a book on sport and adventure in 1937 (Esenwein died in 1946).

In 1920, a serious competitor came to the market: Ed Rosenthal, who founded the magazine *Writer's Digest* in Cincinnati, Ohio, where the company is still located today.<sup>12</sup> The magazine's subtitle, "A Monthly Journal of Information on Writing Photoplays, Short Stories, Verse, News Stories, Publicity, Advertising etc.," clearly demonstrates its commercial orientation (Rosenthal in Sexton 2007, p. 5). In the 1920s and 1930s, *Writer's Digest* was one of the "writers' mags," magazines divulging the trade secrets of the "pulp fictioneers" (Locke 2004, 12). These magazines offered advice to professional writers of popular genre fiction in the 1920s, and they continued to chronicle the demise and final death throes of the pulp market throughout "the Depression and World War II, and long-term paper shortages" (ibid., p. 13). At the same time, as Sexton's anthology *Legends of Literature* (2007) shows, *Writer's Digest* featured articles by successful authors in all genres of literature. Indeed, the magazine prided itself on closely following the market, featuring articles on new trends.

Apart from the magazine and its yearbooks, *Writer's Yearbook* and the annual *Writer's Market*, publisher F+W also built a hugely successful and diverse catalog of handbook titles under the brand *Writer's Digest Books*. The first title listed in the Library of Congress catalog was L. Josephine Bridgart's *How to Write Short Stories* (1921), a full-length monograph. In those early years, there were also courses for photoplay and volumes on the "cardinal elements of short-story writing" (Reeve 1929) and the "elements of plot construction" (Abott 1929). After a long gap, the catalog picked up again in 1961, with Aron M. Mathieu's *Creative Writer*, followed by Jerome Judson's *Poet and the Poem* (1963). From this period onward, there was a steady stream of new writing handbooks about a range of genres—from cartoon gags, to poetry, the novel, confession writing, and the mystery—along with regular reprints of Mathieu and Judson. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was a veritable explosion of guidebooks in *Writer's Digest Books* (including a volume on *How to Write "How-To Books" and Articles* (Hull 1981)) targeting different audiences, but primarily focused on commercial writing. This tendency toward specialization became even more pronounced in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with series like *Elements of Fiction Writing*, *Genre Writing Series*, and *Write Great Fiction*. The *Writer's Guide To* series featured, besides the above-mentioned book on poisons for detective writers, volumes on crime-scene investigations (Wingate 1992), on everyday life in the 1800s (McCutcheon 1993), and character-traits, including profiles of human behaviors and personality types (Edelstein 2006), two of which written by PhD-holding authors.

Today, all the big publishing houses as well as numerous smaller presses and academic presses have some type of advice book or series in their catalogs, and numerous self-published handbooks and websites contribute the further growth of the genre. However, the century-old empire of *Writer's Digest*, which now also boasts a solid online presence, continues to offer—like the advice industry in the olden days—articles, interviews, courses, workshops, manuscript services, competitions, and self-publishing. After its original publisher F+W filed for bankruptcy in 2016, the brand was purchased by Penguin Random House.

### *Advice in Literature*

As the literary advice industry grew more prominent, authors started to respond to it in literature. This can be related to what systems theory sees

as an important characteristic of the autonomy and professionalization of a literary system, i.e., self-reflection. In *The Program Era* (2009) McGurl famously studied American postwar fiction as a self-reflexive, literary response to the rise of creative writing, which evolved from a pedagogy into a massive form of sponsorship of literature by neoliberal research institutions, and a new literary institution. In our comparative study of the rise of the literary interview as a hybrid genre in the French, German, and English literary fields in the same period that saw the arrival of literary advice, we came across something similar: When a new form or practice intrudes or emerges in the literary system, literary authors will respond to it, either by mocking it (and the new actors it entails), or by experimenting with it as a new literary form. (Masschelein et al. 2014, pp. 37–39).

A first strategy employed by authors to respond to literary advice is incorporating it into literary fictions. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a lot of British and American fiction—from Charles Dickens to Henry James, to name just some of the most well-known names—featured author-characters, who comment on literary life in the period. Atwell draws attention to a short story by Scottish author J. M. Barrie, in which a number of dead authors discuss the contemporary literary situation, including the emerging scene of literary advice. One of the most explicit novels on the rise of the commercial literary scene and the concomitant literary advice industry in the UK was George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891). The novel introduces Mr. Whelpdale, a literary advice author who, in Paul Vlitos's contribution to this book, will serve as a guide to the British advice scene from the period. As several chapters—by Elizabeth Kovach, Jim Collins, and Andrés Franco Harnache—in this book demonstrate, today authors from all literatures still resort to fiction to make sense of the omnipresence of writing culture and creative writing.

A second common reaction to the rising advice industry, and a strategy used by some advice authors, starting with Poe, is parody. In his dissertation on contemporary literary advice in France (2018), Gert-Jan Meyntjens studied the French tradition of *conseils*, which followed a comparable path of professionalization as the Anglo-American world in the nineteenth century. Meyntjens singles out two examples from the early advice period. The Symbolist poet, Remy de Gourmont, in his *Conseils familiers à un jeune écrivain* (1896, Familiar Advice to a Young Writer), advised readers that it is better not to write than to write, because the literary world is depraved and mercenary. In *Introduction à la l'étude*

*de la stratégie littéraire* (1912, Introduction to the Study of Literary Strategy), Belgian author Fernand Divoire presented an overt satire of the literary world, in order to strategically guide the aspiring author on how to network (Meyntjens 2018, pp. 73–76). Contemporary advice authors also resort to parody to make their work stand out. Sandra Newman and Howard Mittelmark’s *How Not to Write a Novel: 200 Mistakes to Avoid at all Costs If You Ever Want to Get Published* (2008), for instance, is according to the blurb “hilarious” but “extremely useful,” whereas *How Not to Write a Novel: Confessions of a Midlist Author* by David Armstrong (2003) summarizes each chapter with a warning: Either “Don’t be an author,” or simply “Don’t do it.”<sup>13</sup> In more sophisticated cases, like French author François Bon or American avant-garde poet Kenneth Goldsmith—respectively the subjects of Meyntjens’s and Ioannis Tsitsovit’s chapters—parody is not simply used to distinguish one’s method of advice within the market, as in the negative advice books cited above, but as an avant-garde strategy to resist dominant advice cultures, and as an antidote to self-expressive literary culture as a whole.

A third literary form that will become increasingly more important for literary advice, as we will elucidate below, is autobiography or memoir. Atwell draws attention to the importance of Anthony Trollope’s *Autobiography* for the development of literary advice (Atwell 2013, pp. 23–28). Published in 1883 in London, Trollope’s candor about the business of literature and his decidedly unromantic, “secretarial” descriptions of his writing habits (*ibid.*, p. 24) shocked his readers, but the book prefigured the Besant-lineage of mixing writing advice with advice about the customs and practicalities of the literary world. One of Trollope’s great examples was his mother, Frances, who at the age of 50 started writing in order to support her family, and wrote more than 40 novels between 1830 and her death in 1863. Although extraordinary in her late and prolific career, Frances Trollope was in fact not that much of an exception, as many scholars have shown how the newly professionalized literary field was remarkably open to the entry of women as freelance authors.

### *The Role of Women in the Advice Industry*

Women had been targeted by both the commercial publishing world and the literary advice industry from the mid-nineteenth century onward, not just as readers but also as aspiring authors. Moreover, women played, from the early days of the advice industry to the present, an important

role as authors. In the existing scholarship on the early period of literary advice, many female advice authors have been unearthed. In the present book, Caughy discusses the case of *Atalanta*, a popular British magazine aimed at girls and young women, founded by L. T. Meade, an Irish feminist, in 1887. The magazine offered both short stories and serials by respected authors as well as essays on literature, literary advice, and competitions for the aspiring author. In the USA, Collins describes the case of Eleanor Kirk, “one of the unheralded pioneers of the American how-to writing guide” (Collins 2016, p. 140). Like Meade, Kirk was a suffragette, a working woman, and a single mother who published an early advice guide *Periodicals That Pay Contributors* (1888). She set up a Bureau of Correspondence that offered manuscript advice (ibid., p. 144), as did Flora Thompson, who founded The Peverel Society in the 1920s in Britain (Hilliard 2006, pp. 62–66).

Beyond the realm of amateur writing, women were also present in the more professional advice industry, both in the UK and in the USA. In the genre of early mystery advice, quite a number of prominent literary actors were active, like Carolyn Wells, who wrote one of the first handbooks for Esenwein’s Writer’s Library in 1912, and Marie F. Rodell, a literary agent, editor, and writer, whose highly specialized and “businesslike” advice targeted both the American (in 1943) and the British market (in 1954) (Masschelein and De Geest 2017, p. 100). In the emerging academic field of English composition, D. G. Myers mentions Adele Bildersee, an American pedagogue, whose proto-feminist *Imaginative Writing* (1927) “is recovering() a lost women’s tradition” through the many model authors she discusses in her book (Myers [1996] 2016, p. 141).

Two American advice authors of the 1930s and 1940s, Dorothea Brande and Brenda Ueland, stand out, not only because they have remained consistently in print until today, but also because they embody a particularly successful type of literary advice which could be regarded as a third way, besides advice on literary technique and practical advice about publication, namely advice about creativity and “literary lifestyle.” This type of advice brought literary advice close to self-help, which, as Beth Blum argues in *The Self-Help Compulsion* (2020), is in many ways linked to the literary culture of the era, including so-called high modernism. Moreover, as Alexandria Peary shows in this book, the teachings of Brande and Ueland have become part and parcel of the “informal aesthetic education of writers” because of their practical focus on the

psychological aspects of composition and voice, and the emphasis on creativity as a general human capacity.

Dorothea Brande's *Becoming a Writer* (1934) was a mixture of Freudian-based pop-psychology with practical advice about unlocking creativity and about leading a writerly life. Brande goes into extraordinary detail about which writing tools to use, what kind of friends to have, and even what to drink. At the same time, she explicitly distanced herself from technical writing advice and from insights about the publishing world, to focus instead on techniques to unleash creativity, which are used until today: writing daily for a certain amount of time without inhibitions, and "reading as a writer." Both practical and inspirational, *Becoming a Writer* was rediscovered in the 1980s, when both in the US and the UK new editions appeared with prefaces by established authors and creative writing teachers of the time, John Gardner (in 1981) and Malcolm Bradbury (in 1983), who would both go on to write advice books of their own. Brande's approach was moreover regarded as a precursor to the technique of freewriting, later popularized by Ken Macrorie and Peter Elbow, which remains an important staple in writing advice to this day (see Peary in this book). According to one of the leading figures in the therapeutic writing movement, Celia Hunt, "Brande's book, although dated in some respects, is still one of the best on writing and the creative process" (Hunt 2000, p. 22).

Despite her continued popularity, Brande is not without her detractors. Michelene Wandor sees Brande's self-help style of writing as the ideological precursor of contemporary how-to books that advocate looking inward, and focusing on self-expression and self-improvement, while deliberately concealing the critical work involved in writing (Wandor 2008, pp. 109–110). Moreover, cultural historian Joanna Scutts (2013) draws a link between the self-help discourse propagated by Brande, who also published *Wake Up and Live!* (1936)—a self-help title which the notorious modernist author Ezra Pound "is said to have chanted [...] every day for forty years" (Blum 2014, p. 21)—and the values of American fascism, to which she had personal ties.<sup>14</sup>

A similarly re-edited self-help/advice classic is Brenda Ueland's *If You Want to Write: A Book about Art, Independence and Spirit* (1983), which more explicitly than Brande addressed a female audience. Basing her notions of creativity and poetics on William Blake and on Russian nineteenth-century novelists, the book urged writers to "Be Careless, Reckless! Be a Lion! Be a Pirate! When you Write" and encouraged



women to neglect their housework in order to write. Although, as Alice Kaplan points out, Ueland's book is shallow in its neglect of tradition and its overemphasis on self-expression, and Ueland is not without personal faults,<sup>15</sup> her career in a way prefigures a contemporary literary trend. Not just *If You Want to Write*, but also *Me: A Memoir* ([1939] 1996), about her bohemian life, was "a pioneering book, one of the first in an autobiographical tradition, now so central to American writing, that gives value to everyday experience" (Kaplan 2007, p. 3).

Brande and Ueland thus stood at the crossroads of three subgenres—handbooks for personal writing, self-help, and the writing memoir—that would become very important in later literary advice. First of all, the shift of emphasis in these books to creativity, self-improvement, and seeing yourself as a writer is still valued today, especially in handbooks about forms of writing which do not have publication as their primary goal, but instead emphasize the importance of process and personal growth, as Arne Vanraes, and Leni Van Goidsenhoven and Anneleen Masschelein will discuss in this book. Secondly, these popular forms lie at the basis of the immensely commercial tradition of self-help, in which writing will be instrumentalized as a technology of the self (McGee 2005; Illouz 2008). Thirdly, in her contribution to this book, Elizabeth Kovach examines how Brande and Ueland can be seen as prefiguring the genre of the writing memoir (and its most recent incarnation, the "literary-advice memoir") which emerges at the more literary end of literary advice in the second half of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century.

## ‘THE PROGRAM’ AND THE RISE OF THE ADVICE AUTHOR AS AUTHOR

### *Creative Writing and Literary Advice*

Short story handbooks momentarily "faded from vogue in the 1950s" (Levy 1993, p. 80), until a new wave of handbooks began to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s, to really pick up speed in the 1980s and 1990s. In this period, Levy distinguishes between the rise of "semi-autobiographical writers' advisories," such as John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writer* (1984), or Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down to the Bones* (1986), and "workshop classics" (ibid., p. 102) like Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction: A Guide to the Narrative Craft* (first published in 1982, with a tenth edition published by The University

of Chicago Press in 2019). In general, according to Levy, handbooks in this period displayed a great continuity with the earlier period in terms of form and content, although the discussion between art and craft was now rephrased in terms of the debate around MFA programs: Does creative writing pedagogy lead to a safe, stereotypical form of storytelling, or is it a necessary breeding ground for budding authors, that fosters new literary voices (see also Harbach 2014)?

The background of this evolution is complex. A determining factor, the institutionalization of MFA programs, has been extensively studied by, among others, Myers, McGurl, Glass, Dawson, and Wandor (with the latter two also focusing on Australia and the UK). Already in the 1930s, and even more so following the readjustment legislations for soldiers after the World Wars, universities saw a huge increase in student population. This contributed to the rapid growth of a lot of programs, among which creative writing, which was established as an MFA in the late 1930s (Iowa's Writers' Workshop was founded in 1936) in several major American universities. As McGurl (2009) argues, the spread of the program created a more or less self-sustaining circuit, with separate publication channels, in which creative writing students more often than not ended up becoming creative writing teachers themselves. This massive spread of pedagogues obviously also stimulated the production of textbooks, based on workshop methods, most famously R.V. Cassill's *Writing Fiction* (1962).<sup>16</sup> Today, the main part of advice books has been written by creative writing teachers either in MFA's or in private or community workshops.

Although McGurl structures the chronology of his grand narrative of creative writing and postwar American fiction according to the diktats of commercial writing advice, "Write what you know," "Show don't tell," and "Find your own voice," relating them to key values of experience (authenticity), craft (tradition), and creativity (freedom), this is not based on the handbooks which are accused of perpetuating them. Indeed, McGurl consistently focuses on the academic tradition of creative writing, leaving the popular tradition of fictioneering and the genre traditions it is related to almost entirely out of his narrative. However, as Christopher Hilliard points out for Britain, the culture of amateur and popular writing from the interwar period, which was fed by the opportunities to publish in popular and pulp fiction magazines, did not really disappear after the war. It was transformed by the "reformulation of mainstream literary culture from the late 1940s (that) made the boundaries between

“literary” and “popular” writing more porous” (Hilliard 2006, p. 10), to re-emerge in full-force in 1970s DIY cultures fostered by feminist, Marxist and punk groups.<sup>17</sup> In the USA, McGurl notes the growing literary importance of various non-dominant groups, like Jewish, African-American or Hispanic-American authors, who have entered American postwar literature and put pressure on the canon. Although handbooks are usually quick to follow new genre trends, here they did not seem to follow suit. As far as we can tell, handbooks targeting specific groups emerged relatively late. Robert Fleming’s *The African American Writers Handbook: How to Get in Print and Stay in Print* (2000) and Jewell Parker Rhodes’ *Free Within Ourselves: Fiction Lessons for Black Authors* (1999), and *The African American Guide to Writing and Publishing Nonfiction* (2002), for instance, were all published around the turn of the century, and they are but a very small part of the general handbook offer, although contemporary handbooks generally alert writers to be aware of sensitivities regarding the representation of ethnic and minority characters.

A specific trend in literary advice in the 1980s, related to the popularity of creative writing programs and the status of star teachers like Gardner, Goldberg, and Burroway, is the rise of the advice author *as author*. In what follows, we will take a closer look at three factors which have contributed to the changing status of the advice author: the popularity of the craft interview and the celebrity status of “star authors” (Moran 2000); the success of screenwriting “gurus” and advice “brand authors” (Thompson 2011, p. 211); and the consolidation of the “writing memoir.”

### *Interviews and Literary Advice*

A first important factor is the emergence on the scene of the *Paris Review* in 1953. As has been amply documented, one of the most successful strategies of the magazine was its strategic use of the interview, especially in relation to craft. As Rebecca Roach shows in her contribution, *The Paris Review* was by no means the first to interview authors about their craft. From the nineteenth century onward, interviews and surveys were commonly used to question authors about literary and formal issues. In two interview series from different periods, “How Writers Work” and “The Art of Fiction,” Roach shows how the close link between the interview and literary advice played a crucial role in the development and

acceptance of the author interview. The two practices originate in the same period—the professionalization of literature in the late nineteenth century—and they both occupy a relatively marginal position in the field. In the case of the literary interview, this is due to its heteronomy: Because the form belongs to the domain of the press, and is governed by its rules (especially with regard to editing), it is harder for authors to establish authorial control, which is a defining characteristic of the literary field (Masschelein et al. 2014, pp. 20–22).

Literary advice is, like the literary interview, a hybrid form that—in Bourdieusian terms—partakes of different fields, such as education, the press, and self-help. Its strong association with commercial and amateur literary cultures has led to a low symbolic status, and even exclusion from the literary field as such. In the postwar period, as celebrity culture penetrated the literary field (Moran 2000; Murray 2012, pp. 33–36), the literary interview was increasingly accepted as a legitimate form to make writers talk about craft, in a double strategy of individualizing, and also streamlining them. The importance of the carefully edited *Paris Review* interviews which became legendary as a result of a careful selection strategy of established authors and, as Roach points out, the canonization of the interviews in the ensuing *Writers at Work* series, cannot be overestimated.

From the 1980s onward, the abundance of “shop talk” found in interviews also presented new opportunities for literary advice. Collecting quotes and statements from interviews with famous authors was an easy (and often cheap) way to create new volumes of literary advice. One example is *Ernest Hemingway on Writing*, a volume of quotes culled from Hemingway’s novels and his *Paris Review* interview, edited by Larry W. Phillips (1983), adorned with a profile photograph of Hemingway at work on his typewriter. In this way, “new” advice books by Great Authors entered the market, diversifying the (already large) offer, and turning literary advice into a more respected genre. Along with the “backlist”-editorial strategy used by commercial advice publishers, like *Writer’s Digest*, which resulted in frequent reprints of older titles, and new editions of books free from copyright (such as Dorothea Brande and Brenda Ueland), literary advice in the postwar period became more and more connected to legitimate literary author names, rather than to publishing houses or series like *Writer’s Digest*.

The rise of the advice author as author can be considered in the context of “brand-authors,” who are extremely valuable for publishers, because

“their sales are predictable, and second, they are repeaters” (Thompson 2011, p. 212). In the subfield of literary advice in the 1980s and 1990s, this translates as authors who become famous primarily as advice authors, publishing different volumes of writing advice based on the same formula rather than one-offs, and thus building an advice-brand. This trend is most notable in the field of screenwriting advice.

### *Hollywood Gurus and Advice Serials*

A second circumstance which bolstered the return of handbooks in the 1980s, and affected the authorial status of handbook authors, was the media industry, especially film and television (and later on also the games industry and social media). These new media not only increasingly competed with literature for the audience’s attention, but they also contributed to a continuous demand for storytelling. As Jim Collins (2010) and Simone Murray (2012) have shown, in the second half of the twentieth century, screenwriting can no longer be disconnected from the literary field, nor, we may add, from literary advice. While handbooks for photoplays and radioplays have existed since the early days of literary advice, in the 1980s there was a marked increase of hugely successful screenwriting manuals, one of the first being Syd Field’s influential *Screenplay* (1979), which is still a classic in the field. In 1997, Robert McKee published *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*, based on the popular STORY classes which he had developed at the University of San Diego, and within the film industry since 1984. McKee—according to his own website “the Aristotle of our times” and the “guru of gurus”—even appears as the embodiment of all the clichés associated with screenwriting advice (played by Brian Cox) in Charlie Kaufman’s *Adaptation* (2002), a self-reflexive film about the craft of screenwriting.

Other gurus were Christopher Vogler, a Hollywood executive, who adapted Joseph Campbell’s popular comparative study of myths from 1949 into a screenwriting model in *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters* (1992), later adding a volume for literary authors (1998), and Blake Snyder. In 2005, the first volume of Snyder’s immensely popular *Save the Cat!* boasted *The Last Book on Screenwriting You’ll Ever Need* as its subtitle, but it quickly developed into a trilogy, accompanied by software compatible with the Final Draft scriptwriting

software program. Even after Snyder's death in 2009, the brand has kept expanding, most notably in the direction of literature.

These screenwriting gurus, and the mass seminars that bolster their brands, appeal to the autodidact ethos fostered by Hollywood, which has remained very strong despite the rise of academic filmmaking and screenwriting programs, including MFAs. At the same time, the models they propose have drawn a lot of criticism, not just within fictional forms, as in *Adaptation*, where Charlie Kaufman cunningly creates a script by breaking all the rules issued by McKee, but also from an academic perspective. Ian MacDonald, for instance, states that “manuals are not enough,” and calls for more unified and sophisticated screenwriting pedagogies, which incorporate contemporary literary theory, and take into account the collective nature of the writing process in film (see MacDonald 2004a, b). According to Bridget Conor, who studies screenwriting from the perspective of labor in the neoliberal media industry, screenwriting manuals function as “a type of psy-technology and as a sophisticated form of professional self-help” (Conor 2014, p. 121). Like the early literary manuals discussed above, screenwriting handbooks transmit technical knowledge about a very rule-based type of writing, that is petrified into unquestioned, universal models, as Liorah Hoek examines in her discussion of the plot models propagated by Field, McKee and co. Like literary handbooks, screenwriting handbooks also perpetuate ideas about the *habitus* and authorial stance of the screenwriter. They conceal the reality of a collaborative and precarious career in a cultural industry behind the enduring myth of the writer as solitary genius (or the new myth of the “showrunner” as creative mastermind). In so doing, they help to keep the corporate macrostructures of the new cultural economy of media work in place (ibid., pp. 134–135; see also Murray 2012, p. 49; McRobbie 2016; and Grauby in this book).

By the 1990s, similar tendencies as in the screenwriting advice business emerged in the field of literature, albeit on a smaller scale. Successful commercial handbooks were often serialized, with authors building a brand that includes different titles and services, often based on a catchy hook, like James Frey's *How to Write a Damn Good Novel* (1987) (the beginning of series of similarly titled *How to Write a Damn Good...*—manuals for different genres). These advice series were transmedial, i.e., they addressed writing in different media at the same time, capitalizing on the potential of adaption or serialization of a story idea (Murray 2012, p. 35).<sup>18</sup> Handbook gurus presented themselves as coaches and as experts

or authorities, often boasting academic credentials or awards within the niche of their genre (even when, as in the case of McKee, they have not actually written successful screenplays or novels). The “normative poetics” found in these types of commercial handbooks can be considered in terms of “constrained writing,” in that they negotiate different forms of normativity, both explicit and implicit (De Geest and Goris 2010). To apply the notion of “constrained writing” to this kind of object distances it from the avant-garde connotations that the term usually possesses. However, as Tsitsovit's shows in his discussion of Kenneth Goldsmith's *Uncreative Writing* project, sometimes avant-garde strategies like copying and sampling, which emphatically and programmatically go against the whole idea of craft and skill, can come remarkably close to traditional creative writing exercises. Likewise, Gert-Jan Meyntjens and André Franco Harnache show how advice authors and literary authors in the French and in the Hispanic world both adopt, and resist the dominant Anglo-American poetics of creative writing.

### *The Writing Memoir*

One may question to what extent advice gurus really have an authorial status comparable to that of a literary author. Often, the series are more known by their title than by their author (as in the case of *Now Write!* a Penguin series edited by Sherry Ellis, who collects pieces of advice on various genres “from today's best writers and teachers”). However, one literary advice form which has become more and more successful both in terms of economic and symbolic prestige, undeniably hinges on the status of its author, i.e., the “writing memoir,” a phenomenon that should not be confused with How-to guides to memoir writing.<sup>19</sup> Wandor loosely defines the genre as “autobiographical words of wisdom, interviews, aphorisms by famous and successful, money-earning authors, (which) are considered as valuable pedagogic resources” (Wandor 2008, p. 115). The emergence of the writing memoir must be regarded in the context of a shift in various Western literary systems, where since the second half of the twentieth century memoir as a literary genre has become increasingly prominent (Smith and Watson 2010; Couser 2012). Today, memoir and life writing are not just open to a wide range of new voices, but it has become customary for literary authors to begin their career with a memoir or autofiction, and then move to fiction, rather than the other way around (Couser 2012, p. 146).<sup>20</sup> In a time and literary field where

creative writing has become a determining institution, this has led to a high degree of self-reflexivity, both in novels (Mc Gurl) and in memoirs (Smith and Watson 2010).

Given her aversion to self-expression in literary advice, it is not surprising that Wandor does not really consider these works as genuine pedagogical tools. Still, she concedes that some of them—by Margaret Atwood, Stephen King, John Gardner, Ray Bradbury, and Jorge Luis Borges—do have value, not just for the inspiration that they offer, and the fact that these are genuine literary works, but also for their emphasis on writing as labor. To Wandor's list, we can add other bestsellers, like Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life* (1990) or Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird: Some instructions on Writing and Life* (1995), which not only emphasize literary labor, but also focus on the literary description of a specific lifestyle, marked by solitude, introspection, and moral values. Being a writer is here associated with a secluded environment, close to nature, with a love of literature and reading, with specific objects and interiors, and with a patient recording of daily life.

As Bourdieu pointed out for the diaries of the Goncourts, “what attracts and fascinates in the occupation of an artist is not so much the art itself as the artist's life-style, the artist's life” (Boudieu 1993, p. 346). However, more than in the autobiographies of the early period (e.g., Trollope's *Autobiography*) or the self-help style manuals *à la* Brande and Ueland, the writing memoir is not just a depiction of writerly life. Rather, in the blend of memoir and advice, the author shows herself as a writer, *in the act of writing a literary work*. In other words, she teaches by example. This also has the effect that literary advice becomes more subjective, daring, and creative in itself, and is thus “literarized.” Above, we already pointed out more complex forms of advice from a more avant-garde background, like Goldsmith's *Uncreative Writing* (2011), based on his course at the University of Pennsylvania. In 2001, Robert Olen Butler, an experimental author and creative writing professor in Louisiana, filmed his writing process for a PBS series “Inside Creative Writing,” and subsequently put the episodes on the Internet (McGurl 2009, p. 189).

This tendency is perhaps most clear in the highly intriguing works of graphic novelist Lynda Barry. Barry's work is not unique in the sense that comic instruction in drawn form had already given rise to some advice classics, such as Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985), and especially Scott McCloud's seminal *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993). In both cases, these works were followed by other advice



books. Barry's series, *What It Is* (2008), *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor* (2014), and most recently, *Making Comics* (2019), takes this type of advice one step further in the direction of process-oriented works and writing memoir. Not just focusing on technique and craft, Barry explores the nature of creativity in drawing by providing a detailed and highly creative account of her drawing courses at the Wisconsin Madison art department and at the Wisconsin Institute for Discovery. In the notebook-style graphic novels, her own drawings are mixed with those of her students, and advice is interspersed with childhood memories, dreams, and fantasies, in a highly personal drawing style reminiscent of art brut.

### ADVICE IN THE DIGITAL LITERARY SPHERE

Today, literary advice can be conceived as a continuum on (at least) two intersecting axes: on the one hand, from non-literary forms (textbook, interview, and list) to literary forms (memoir, novel, essay, poetry, graphic novel); on the other hand, from amateur audiences that do not envision publication, to literary writing that has a high symbolic value, both in terms of sales figures and of critical esteem, and even literary awards. On the side of non-literary forms which address amateurs and do not envision publication, we find advice for life writing, therapeutic writing manuals and notebook manuals. At the far end of the non-literary forms that nonetheless carry high symbolic esteem, we can situate the MFA creative writing handbooks. Combining literary form with amateur audiences leads towards the self-help tradition, such as Dorothea Brande and Brenda Ueland, or to essays dealing with writer's block, or the creative process. The combination of literary form and high prestige, finally, is found in the writing memoir, literary advice novels, or in the experimental graphic advice novels by Lynda Barry.

This very rudimentary depiction, however, does not suffice in the age of the Internet, which witnessed not just a new explosion of advice, but the emergence of a complex ecology of online and offline advice, of older and newer forms, and of amateurs and professionals. One may wonder, at this point, whether we are not stretching the limits of literary advice too far. Following and extending the arguments of among others, Jim Collins (2010), Beth Driscoll (2014), Sarah Brouillette (2014), and Angela McRobbie (2016), contemporary literary readers are not merely passionate, serious, and aspirational, turning to literature for therapeutic

reasons and for self-improvement. Spurred by the neoliberal impetus to “Be Creative!,” they are consistently activated and coaxed to become writers. Writing is presented as accessible and democratic, as a technique for working on the self, as a path toward a good, meaningful life, and as a potential career. Advice helping you to do it is omnipresent. This evolution has been greatly stimulated by the arrival of the “digital literary sphere,” i.e., a contemporary “multi-actor system that can account for the complex interplay of intellectual, political, and economic forces” (Murray 2018, p. 2). In the recent scholarly literature on the impact of the Internet on literature, literary advice is sometimes invoked—for instance by Simone Murray—but it has not yet been directly studied. The domain will be opened by several contributions in this book, e.g., Roach, who focuses on the proliferation of the author interview as advice strategy on the Internet, Van Goidsenhoven and Masschelein, who discuss the on- and offline advice strategies of Jessica Kingsley Publishers, and, most importantly, by Bronwen Thomas, who examines literary advice on Wattpad, one of the most prominent writing communities.

A number of parallels (besides obvious differences, such as scale) between the contemporary digital literary sphere and the early period of advice stand out. First of all, the Internet, and especially the “post-press” phenomena of fanfiction and self-publishing have given rise to a massive resurgence of amateur and fan cultures, and to what Robert Stebbins has called “serious leisure” (the systematic pursuits of amateurs, which require skill, knowledge, and experience, as well as sincerity, dedication, and seriousness, see Stebbins 2015), for which Aarthi Vadde coined the term “mass amateurization” (Vadde 2017, p. 27). These new amateur literary cultures are characterized by a blurring of the boundary of reader and writer, by a strong sense of community, and by a complicated relation of complicity and resistance vis-à-vis the commercial aspect of Internet and the gift economy of social media platforms (Jenkins 2007; Vadde 2017). In her summary of fanfiction studies, in between media studies and narratology, Bronwen Thomas points to an interesting feature from the perspective of literary advice, i.e., its processual nature. Because of fanfiction’s embrace of serialization and process rather than product, its attachment to rules, and its devoted community, readers not only become writers, but also critics and “fictioneers.” In her contribution to this book, Thomas focuses on Wattpad, and shows how advice in this community is hierarchical and multiform. These bodies of community advice could be regarded as a “pre-theory,” much like the early fictioneering body of

work, which—as Thomas shows—is important for cognitive narratological theories.

McGurl, Levey, and Vadde also look at the impact of self-publishing on literature from a combined sociological, philosophical, and narratological viewpoint. In their accounts, there are a number of striking similarities with the early period of advice in the era of amateur and professional writing. According to McGurl, the “Age of Amazon” and self-publishing is “an age of genre fiction,” especially romance and science fiction (McGurl 2016, p. 460) as well as of serial and shorter forms (Levey 2016). Although the symbolic capital of self-publishing is still limited (Waldfoegel 2018, p. 136), several success stories—for instance E. L. James or Andy Weir—have contributed to making self-publishing an important breeding ground for fiction, not just in the eyes of aspiring, but also established authors (most famously Margaret Atwood), publishers, and literary scholars (McGurl 2016; Vadde 2017). The complex relation of self-publishing and fanfiction to both commercialization and community, and their predilection for rule-based genres that are nonetheless subversive, have raised comparisons not only to the late nineteenth century and the pulp fiction era, but also to the paperback-pulp revolution of the 1960s (Levey 2016, n.p.), and the DIY sci-fi counterculture of the 1970s (Vadde 2017, p. 46). It is not surprising, then, that the literary advice industry also sees a revival. For the horde of amateurs, who are finding their way to writing, and for professional authors, who are increasingly expected to perform their authorship online (Murray 2018, pp. 22–52), literary advice—addressing writing, publishing, and authorial stances in the digital literary sphere—is vital. It is issued by commercial advice authors, moguls, gurus, and would-be gurus who are firmly present on the Internet’s many platforms. Older sources of advice content are unearthed and distributed (with or without copyright infringement), and advice is crowd-sourced by the users of the many sites and online writing communities.

Last but not least, in a reaction against the digitalization of literature and in a nostalgic return to “craft,” there is also a resurgence of analog writing culture. In high-end bookstores, library- and museum-shops, luxurious Moleskine notebooks, pencils (not surprisingly one of the cover images for Richard Sennett’s *The Craftsman* (2008) features pencils) are sold alongside elegant hardbacks of writing memoirs, or nostalgic small paperbacks of advice essays (e.g., the Penguin classics *Why I Write* series, named after Orwell’s essay from 1946). These objects also feed the “writing hysteria of the twenty-first century,” and the concomitant

need for writing manuals for the masses. Thus, literary advice, in myriad forms, has deeply penetrated our literary culture on all levels. By no means a marginal genre, literary advice for all its complicity with the creative industries, with commerce, and with normative poetics, is rooted at the heart of literary culture. It is a highly complex historical phenomenon, that cannot be neatly compartmentalized: Despite its omnipresence and its imperialist tendencies, advice is also repressed, reviled, and necessarily forgotten, for in order to uphold the dream of authorship it must remain devoted to the very myths of solitary genius and autonomous creation which it in fact debunks.

## HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

This book is organized in three parts that demonstrate the broad scope of research on literary advice. Part I, “From Fictioneering to Wattpad,” focuses on the most important developments of literary advice from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century. John Caughey opens the book with a broad discussion of the history of fictioneering, ranging from the debates between Sir Walter Besant and Henry James to *Atalanta’s* School of Fiction targeting aspiring female authors. Mary Stuart Atwell’s contribution zooms in on the aftermath of Henry James’s “Art of Fiction,” studying not just the contemporary authors that weighed in on the discussion, but also bringing the debate into the present. Paul Vlitos presents an overview of early British literary advice, taking George Gissing’s advice author character Whelpdale as his guide to unfold the wide range of advice available in the early twentieth century. In her chapter on author interviews as increasingly important sources of literary advice, Rebecca Roach compares different moments in the history of the craft interview, from the early twentieth century to the twenty-first century. The final contribution in this part, by Bronwen Thomas, studies the emergence of peer-to-peer advice in online writing communities like Wattpad in the twenty-first century.

Part II presents a number of case studies of literary advice, in which specific corpora or types of literary advice are scrutinized. First of all, Liorah Hoek’s chapter studies how the dominance of triangular plot models in some of the most commonly used advice books until today has streamlined concepts of plot, and raises the question whether different visual representations might yield different plots. Françoise Grauby examines a broad sample of contemporary French literary advice to reveal

the discursive construction of authorial “postures” and the way in which handbooks perpetuate conceptions of authorship. Alexandria Peary’s contribution explores more self-help oriented advice classics as a form of informal aesthetic education. Arne Vanraes turns to a very specific type of advice, i.e., advice about keeping a notebook, and unearths their underlying process-oriented philosophy. The second part concludes with Leni Van Goidsenhoven and Anneleen Masschelein’s exploration of the field of therapeutic writing handbooks, focusing on the handbook series in the catalog of niche-publisher JKP.

Part III, finally, examines various ways in which literary advice culture in the broad sense is adopted and resisted in different cultures and within literatures. Ioannis Tsitsovits shows how Kenneth Goldsmith’s antagonistic project of “uncreative writing” which emphasizes copying over originality, echoes some of the writing exercises proposed by classic writing advice. Gert-Jan Meyntjens discusses François Bon, one of France’s most well-known creative writing pedagogues, who in a pseudonymous mock-translated manual introduces the American advice tradition as a subversive move to revive contemporary French literature. Andrés Franco Harnache provides a broad overview of the influence of Anglo-American creative writing pedagogy on contemporary Hispanic literature, but also advocates that contemporary authors resist this pedagogy by reconnecting to their own literary traditions. The last two contributions of the book examine the emergent phenomenon of the advice novel. Elizabeth Kovach focuses on the examinations of writing as work in the novels of Deborah Levy and Alexander Chee. Jim Collins’s contribution reads three contemporary novels, by Tommy Orange, Sigrid Nunez, and Ocean Vuong, that depict the changed relation between amateur and professional writing in the twenty-first century, and raise the question of voice, so central to literary advice, in a new way.

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## NOTES

1. In this book, terms like ‘handbook,’ ‘manual,’ ‘guidebook,’ ‘How-to book,’ and ‘textbook’ will be used more or less interchangeably, despite obvious distinctions in the way each format presents itself, for instance the amount of exercises, the directive language that is used, the insertion of textboxes and summaries, the inclusion of bibliography and sources, etc. We will reserve the notion of ‘literary advice’ for the broad category, with the different authors in our book maintaining their preference for a certain designation.
2. Both Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse* ([1972] 1980) and David Bordwell in *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985) refer to Percy Lubbock’s *The Craft of Fiction*. Tzvetan Todorov turns to a more popular form of advice, building his theory of detective fiction on S. S. Van Dine’s “Twenty Rules of Detective Fiction” (Todorov 1977).
3. According to Pierre Bourdieu, doxa is “what circulates between contemporary philosophers, of those of different epochs [...] not only canonical texts, but a whole range of philosophical doxa carried by intellectual rumour – labels of schools, truncated quotations, functioning as slogans in celebration or polemics – and above all, perhaps, in school manuals (an unmentionable reference), which perhaps do more than anything else to constitute the ‘common sense’ of an intellectual generation” (Bourdieu 1993, p. 32).
4. By making available to an English-speaking audience some of the research on the French advice tradition, most notably Françoise Grauby’s *La Roman de la creation, écrire entre mythes et pratiques* (2015) and Gert-Jan Meyntjens’s PhD research *Contemporary Literary Advice in France: Adopting, Adapting and Transforming American Creative Writing Handbooks* (2018), and by including a chapter on the rise of creative writing in the Hispanic world by Andrés Franco Harnache, we hope to contribute to broadening the scope of an emerging ‘literary advice studies’.
5. Unlike the academies for painting, music, and dance, academies of languages and literatures have traditionally been much less involved in education. According to the 1634-mission statement of the Académie Française, its task is to compose a grammar, rhetorics, and poetics for the French language, but the main focus of their publishing activities was clearly grammar.
6. Caughey contests the idea that the short story is a typical American genre, and draws attention to existing short story traditions in Britain and in France (Caughey 2016, p. 123). A similar nationalist rivalry existed for other genres, such as the mystery genre (Masschelein and De Geest 2017).
7. “The Psyche Zenobia,” later reprinted as “How to Write a Blackwood Article,” is basically a send-up of literary advice avant-la-lettre. By “article”

Poe means a sensational tale or short story. As is usual with Poe, it is hard to know when he is pulling whose leg—if not his own. In this period, *Blackwood's Magazine* also ran a regular feature (“Noctes Ambrosianae”) containing spoof advice banter.

8. As Mary Atwell has shown for Dickens and Bulwer-Lytton, and Jeanne Campbell Reesman and Dale Walker (1999) for Jack London, many authors were both generous and ambivalent in taking up the role of mentor, corresponding with aspiring authors.
9. A journal with the same name was founded in 1889 by William S. Hill, who had founded the first professional journal, *The Writer* in 1887 (Caughey 2016, p. 108). For more information about professional writing magazines in the UK, see Hilliard (2006, pp. 31–33).
10. Andrew Levy describes the 1920s–1930s as a phase of “counter-handbooks,” indicating the strong critiques from New Critics against the formalist and nationalist tendencies of the first-phase handbooks. Caughey, by contrast, convincingly argues that the New Critics developed their theories of different genres not merely in opposition to, but also based on, the earlier fictioneering pre-theories.
11. Another rule, “Kill your darlings,” is commonly attributed to William Faulkner, but according to Wickman, the phrase comes from Arthur Quiller-Couch’s 1914 lecture on style (Wickman 2013).
12. Originally, it was called *Successful Writing*, changing to *Writer's Digest* in 1921.
13. The negative form of advice, or the idea of prohibitions, is present since the beginning of literary advice, and is not always used parodically. For instance, Claire Gilman’s *How Not to Get Published. Fifty Mistakes to Avoid if You Want to Get Published* (2013) or Ben Yagoda’s composition guide *How to Not Write Bad. The Most Common Writing Problems and How to Avoid Them* (2013)—although radically different in tone—are both serious manuals.
14. Brande was married to Seward Collins, editor of *The Bookman* who later on started the right-wing magazine *The American Review*, to which Brande contributed, and both were associated with American fascism. Scutts links Brande’s self-improvement ethos to the Nietzschean “Will to succeed,” elitism and a critique of modernity (Scutts 2013).
15. Kaplan unearths a plagiarism scandal from 1949, where Ueland herself violated the high standards of authenticity which she laid out in her earlier manual.
16. Initially, creative writing classes used New Critical anthologies and textbooks, such as Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate’s *The House of Fiction* (1950) or Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s *Understanding Fiction*, from 1943 and re-edited in 1959 (McGurl 2009, pp. 132–133).

17. Hilliard cites the arrival of the paperback, exemplified in Britain by the success of publisher Penguin, who no longer distinguished between “high Modernist” literature and “middlebrow” or genre fiction, as one factor contributing to a changing landscape (ibid., pp. 277–278).
18. Screenwriting handbooks for fiction films have long been the standard in the industry. However, since the success of television series like *The Sopranos*, and the rise of ‘quality television,’ more specialized guides for series are available, focusing on important concepts in this subfield, such as the showrunner and the Bible (the story DNA of a long-running series).
19. The writing memoir is not included as a subgenre in Smith and Watson’s useful classification of common forms of memoir in *Reading Autobiography*, but they do pay attention to the rise of How-to guides for life writing (Smith and Watson 2010, pp. 159–162) in different formats. Likewise, Couser signals the rise of manuals for memoir in general (Couser 2012, p. 54).
20. The importance of this trend is also reflected in the boom of handbooks for memoir writing and creative nonfiction since the 1980s. Following the adagio that “everyone can be a writer, because everyone has a story,” these guides address a very broad range of audiences, from retired people wanting to note down their family history, in the wake of the popularity of genealogy projects, to aspiring authors pursuing a literary career. Moreover, memoir includes several subgenres, like journaling, notebook writing, and therapeutic writing, which more often than not do not envision publication.

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PART I

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# From Fictioneering to Wattpad



## CHAPTER 2

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# Learning Fiction by Subscription: The Art and Business of Literary Advice 1884–1895

*John S. Caughey*

### INTRODUCTION

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, fiction—to adapt a phrase of Edward Gibbon—was elevated into an art and degraded into a trade. Beginning in the mid-1880s, an agitated coupling of craft and commerce in the Anglo-American world of letters created a circle either virtuous and vicious—depending on one’s literary sensibilities—making authorship available and attractive on an unprecedented scale. It took literary studies until the middle of the next century to awaken to fiction’s standing as an art, and the discipline’s reckoning with its commercial aspects was delayed further still. Fiction’s arrival as a legitimate player on the cultural field had, however, occasioned an earlier era of discussion and dispute in the literary advice industry, where virtually every aspect of writer’s life came under consideration. According to the tenor of the times, the writer of fiction, unlike the poet, could be made, or rather self-made. Such making, however, occurred neither at the foot of a professor nor in a fit of Romantic agony off in a garret somewhere, but rather by subscription.

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In the informal school of the late-Victorian periodical market, articles on technique expounded fundamental principles, authors debated the merits of typewriters, advertisements from agents interrupted the progress of a serial, illustrated “at-home” intimate interviews lingered over the material fruits of the literary laborer’s life, and cash-prize story contests invited the readers to try their own hand. At the heart of it all was the short story, a self-consciously new genre uniquely available as an “art” that could be practiced—with profit—by anyone.

The abrupt rise of literary advice discourse—a formation that would quickly expand beyond the magazines to include how-to handbooks, correspondence schools, literary consultation services, and other related practices—struck writers and critics of the time with considerable force, spurring a welter of arguments over its value. Many embraced it enthusiastically, lauding it as a democratizing force that opened literature to women and the working classes. Many others rejected it with an equal measure of vehemence, seeing in it the very end of literary history. Critics today, however, are apt to be struck with considerably less power and tend to overlook it altogether. If they acknowledge it all, it is to dismiss this proliferation of literary meta-discourse as little other than a symptomatic by-product of more fundamental social or economic forces, one of the intermediary modes through which capitalism coaxes individuals into ever-deepening acts of self-commodification. Indeed, literary advice seems a particularly insidious activation of capital in which individuals are invited to treat themselves as the raw material, mining their deepest personal experiences and most meaningful relationships in the hopes of turning out a saleable story. Unsurprisingly, if it appears in scholarly studies at all, literary advice thus usually features as the uninspiring background against which the protagonists of literary history define themselves, offering them simple formulae to be defied, economic imperatives to be negotiated, and conventional wisdom to be subverted.

To dismiss the field of literary advice in this way, however, is not only to overlook one of the most prominent and definitively novel features of the period but it is also to turn away from an open window on an aspect of creative practice that is too little studied. Literary scholars often regard the literary advice proffered in the late nineteenth century as simplistic, naïve, and vulgar because they treat it as if it were a kind of proto-novel theory. But literary advice discourse was not about how to interpret fictions but about how to make them—and make a living from them. The form of knowledge that the field promulgates is different in kind from “theories”

of fiction, and to think of it as primarily ideological is to misunderstand it altogether. The practical focus that literary advice discourse takes on the writing process, from inspiration to composition to publication, connects the content of a fiction with forms of life that produced it, and links professional life with representations of life. The vantage point offered through literary advice discourse proves particularly useful because of its scale, a scale that opens the field of vision out beyond the tactics of an individual author, capturing rather a field of social interactions and practices both commercial and artistic. The literary advice industry, in short, was both a market and a marketplace of ideas.

In order to help keep this distinctive character of the field in mind, and for the sake of terminological convenience, I will employ the term “fictioneering” to refer to the specific form of literary do-it-yourself fashioning that emerges in the final fifteen years of the nineteenth century. In practice, the term was only used sporadically—and often derisively—but it has the advantage of signaling the self-consciously middle-ground position that literary advice discourse stakes between theory and practice and between art and business. Looking to the profession of “engineering,” fictioneering thinks of itself a fusion of science and art that employs specialized knowledge and skills for applied, often explicitly commercial, ends. A fictioneer anxiously aspires to be “professional,” desiring legitimacy in the eyes of the broader public while nonetheless wanting exemption from the gatekeepers, fixed routines, and bureaucratic demands of the more established professions. Advice articles, handbooks, novels, and stories about artists—the whole collective enterprise of fictioneering—had concrete implications for who the writer aspired to be, for what she took her subject to be, for how she would give it form, and for how she would *live*, in both the social and the economic sense of that term. To become a literary worker was not only to pursue a newly professionalizing career, but also to craft a self. At first sight, the archive of fictioneering merely records, in the most prosaic way possible, the ways in which a writer might make herself through prose: the various exercises, technical tips, and recommended model readings that anyone who aspires to write fiction needs to work through. Yet, within these atlases of the mundane lurks a stranger and deeper patterning of life as well as a possibility for rethinking the nature of literary knowledge.

Without question, there is much within the articles and advice columns that seem grossly commercial, embarrassingly sincere, or flat-out ridiculous; the genre is undeniably the haunt of small-time gifters and

enthusiastic quacks. Because of the mechanistic associations and taints of middlebrow aspiration, writers who may well have benefited from how-to literature are generally disinclined to admit it. On top of that, much of the advice might, in retrospect, appear as *bad* advice. The present study can only admit to finding in all of these apparent deterrents additional recommendations to the subject, as they testify to a literary culture that is very much in flux and, therefore, very much alive. In such a culture, competing practices for solving the deepest problems involved in both telling and selling a work of art appear in the open, where they figure as the central issues any aspirant to fiction would be forced to deal with. The would-be writer had to study the market, experiment with it, and shape a self in relation to it. The practical knowledge a fictioneer gained regarding the field of literary production might be wrong—she could entirely misjudge both what was wanted and what she was capable of providing—but such failures ought to figure into literary history as much as the triumphs, given how much the former outnumber the latter.

In what follows, I focus on the “long decade” of fictioneering’s emergence, which begins in 1884 with the landmark “Art of Fiction” debate and ends in 1895, a year that marks a shift in literary advice discourse with the opening of “the age of the handbook” when the stand-alone how-to manual took over as fictioneering’s primary vehicle.<sup>1</sup> Between these years, literary advice discourse most actively unfolds within the relatively contained space of periodical culture. Because it is the focus of another chapter in this volume, my treatment of the “Art of Fiction” debate is necessarily glancing (see Atwell in this book). The brief detour through this seminal moment is meant only to show how the exchange opened—rather than ended—an intense “era of discussion” while also demonstrating the role that periodical culture played in sustaining it. A broad and generally chronological outline of the periodical landscape follows, charting the ways in which magazines progressively realize their interactive potential, most intensely with the genre of the short story. I conclude with a case study on a “school of fiction” run by *Atalanta* magazine that is intended to display the characteristic elements of fictioneering in a more fine-grained way while also calling particular attention to the way it opened education in fiction to new classes of writers. The point throughout is to make visible an interactive literary culture that does far more than impose itself on unwitting consumers. While it is shot through with commercial interests, literary advice discourse is not a deterministic and dominating ideological formation. What it does instead is provide

an array of practices and ideas that individuals put to use on their own terms. Rather than reducing literature to disposable commodities that feature pre-digested plots, the interactions engendered within magazines produced a constellation of competing ideas and ideals, including the very distinction between authentic literature and mere market fiction.

## THE ART OF DISCUSSING FICTION

Looking at the literary field between 1884 and 1895 from the angle of the fictioneer is to glimpse a universe parallel to the one usually offered in literary histories. In this alternate world, familiar names appear in diminished roles and unexpected capacities while unknown figures loom forth, rivaling the artists we now take to define the period. In both worlds, the “Art of Fiction” debate of 1884 stands as a landmark. In literary studies, Henry James’s contribution is the lone surviving document. James emerges as the undisputed winner and his endlessly anthologized essay has been called the “most popular and surely the most influential brief statement of fictional theory ever made” (Miller 1972, p. 27). Indeed, one of the long-standing questions about the debate is why James chose for his primary antagonist an “efficient [...] hack” like Walter Besant and why he chose to publish his essay in the middle-brow *Longman’s* magazine (Edel 1962, p. 124). Literary historians have often made their perspective on the debate out to be the contemporary consensus as well, but the view at the time was quite different. Our view of James’s influence depends on making the “Art of Fiction” debate into a dispute over how to interpret fiction rather than about how to write it. Perhaps the most efficient way to recalibrate our understanding of the moment is to remember that in 1895, more than a decade after the original exchange, James endured the profound shame of the *Guy Domville* debacle while Walter Besant, by contrast, earned the rare distinction of a knighthood for his service to the world of letters. At the very least, the contrast between Sir Walter’s elevation and Mr. James’s humiliation provides a suggestive clue of how differently the literary field can be viewed, and the first step toward understanding this other view is to return to the larger context of the debate, a context that is surprisingly well preserved in the periodical press.

While the “Art of Fiction” affair began with a lecture that Besant delivered before the Royal Institution on April 25, 1884, the initial rise of fictioneering plays out almost entirely in periodical culture. If

“modernism began in the magazines”—as Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman claim—so too did fictioneering. Indeed, they often coexisted in the same issues (Scholes and Wulfman 2010, p. 43).<sup>2</sup> Besant’s lecture, in fact, owed its immediate preservation and its lasting impact to the newspaper and periodical press. Within a few weeks of the talk, the *Times* offered a leading article on the occasion and the *Pall Mall Gazette* offered two—a short notice and a more substantial piece by the Scottish man of letters Andrew Lang, yet again titled the “Art of Fiction.” The interest thus generated in the event led Chatto & Windus to publish the lecture in pamphlet form with a new appendix by Besant on, fittingly enough, how to publish. Henry James, who did not attend the lecture, worked from this text to compose his response. Before *Longman’s* published James’s article, however, Besant’s sally spurred further comment from *The Spectator* and a number of other journals in Britain as well as the *Nation*, the *New York Times*, and the *New York Tribune* in the United States.

Contrary to the usual scholarly narrative, James’s essay, published in September 1884, did not put a definitive stop to this burgeoning discussion, but rather brought in new voices, just, it seems, as he suspected it would. One of the more important further contributors was Robert Louis Stevenson, whose “A Humble Remonstrance” directly argues back against James. Also published in *Longman’s*, Stevenson’s essay forcibly returns the discussion to the practice of writing. “Mr. James,” Stevenson observes,

spoke of the finished picture and its worth when done; I, of the brushes, the palette, and the north light. He uttered his views in the tone and for the ear of good society; I, with the emphasis and technicalities of the obtrusive student. But the point, I may reply, is not merely to amuse the public, but to offer helpful advice to the young writer. And the young will not so much be helped by genial pictures of what an art may aspire to at its highest, as by a true idea of what it must be on the lowest terms. (Stevenson 1884, pp. 146–147)

The force of Besant’s lecture, as Stevenson recognizes more clearly than even Besant himself did, is that it opens a space for talking about literature as a form of practice rather than as a “finished picture.” James himself took the rebuke as both serious and substantial, making significant revisions to “The Art of Fiction” on its basis.<sup>3</sup> In a letter thanking Stevenson for his criticisms, James wrote that the ideas in his essay “were only half

of what I had to say, and some day I shall try and express the remainder” (James quoted in Smith 1948, pp. 102–103).

If James was not half-done with what he had to say, neither was anyone else, and the discussion initiated in the debate grew rapidly in scope, progressing both by way of ramification and repetition. The original pieces by Besant, James, and Stevenson were reprinted in magazines, pamphlets, and even pirated books that bound together the contributions in a single volume while also testifying to the hunger for the information offered. But contrary to the current practice in which James’s essay is published as a stand-alone piece, the various essays often featured alongside one another as evidence of a new way of talking about fiction as a practical art and the weight given to the various entries figured differently than it does at present.<sup>4</sup> In an appendix on “Further Reading,” the 1901 handbook *How to Write a Novel*, for instance, puts Besant’s essay at the head of list, while James’s article comes tenth and Stevenson’s twenty-third. A similar perspective appears in Brander Matthews’s seminal “The Philosophy of the Short Story” (1885), a work contemporary with “The Art of Fiction” debate, and also first published in the magazines. Initially featured in the October issue of *Lippincott’s*, Matthews’s essay “eavesdrops” on that controversy, from an adjacent column, as it were:

If it chance that artists fall to talking about their art, it is the critic’s place to listen, that he may pick up a little knowledge. Of late, certain of the novelists of Great Britain and the United States have been discussing the principles and practice of the art of writing stories. Mr. Howells declared his warm appreciation of Mr. Henry James’s novels; Mr. Stevenson made public a delightful plea for Romance; Mr. Besant lectured gracefully on the Art of Fiction; and Mr. James modestly presented his views by way of supplement and criticism. (Matthews 1885, p. 366)

Matthews’s remarks usefully map the field of the debate from a contemporary perspective, putting British and American novelists in dialog and giving such different relative weights to the disputants that James’s essay becomes a “supplement.” It also crucially emphasizes that the discussion consisted of artist’s shoptalk, but noted how the extension such a topic was capable of achieving: “The discussion took a wide range. With more or less fullness it covered the proper aim and intent of the novelist, his material and his methods, his success, his rewards, social and pecuniary, and the morality of his work and of his art” (ibid.). The central point

about this discussion, however, is that its audience was meant to do much more than listen. The most eager auditors were not critics looking to pick up a little knowledge, but aspirant writers looking to learn practical skills. Treating the literary market, to which it was so recent an addition, as a newly discovered world whose riches were open to the enterprising, fictioneering promised at once to map this complex and treacherous terrain and to make their readers an important part of it.

Fictioneers guided their charges by teaching them craftiness as much as craft, sometimes bringing home their lessons at the expense of less wry. Whatever their scruples, fictioneers cultivated a highly self-conscious attitude toward the market and adopted an attitude toward the information communicated by the newspapers and magazines that little resembles the figure of Walter Benjamin's anxious modern whose "imagination" has been "paralyzed" by the newspapers (Benjamin 1969, p. 159). The practical orientation toward the news is most evident in the specialty periodicals devoted to literary laborers that spring up on both sides of the Atlantic in the years immediately following the "Art of Fiction" debate. Taking the shoptalk of the writer to a vastly more detailed level, these magazines urged a very different relationship to the "information" of the nascent "information age," teaching their readers to turn the space of the news media into a training arena. The stories offered in the newspapers and magazines were to be studied, imitated, cut into clips, and sorted in plot files; they were the places one submitted one's own work and if the editors proved unresponsive or unscrupulous, one could find out how to deal with them too.

This interactive focus worked to create a generative cycle that marked a palpable break in literary practice. As James noted in his essay, "within [the last] year or two" "the era of discussion would appear to have been to a certain extent opened" (James 1884, p. 502).<sup>5</sup> James's view of the discussion shows a prescient awareness of how theorizing about how to write fiction had become almost as absorbing as fiction itself. James in fact brings the discussion of how to write novels before the sole "obligation" he's willing to demand of a novel—that "it be interesting"—and finds that it satisfies that demand.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the opening line of his essay justifies its "comprehensive" title by reference to the "*interesting* pamphlet lately published under this name ["The Art of Fiction" by Mr. Walter Besant." The reaction to Besant's pamphlet "appears to indicate that many persons are *interested* in the art of fiction" (ibid., p. 502; emphasis added).

Other laborers in the same field will give it the light of their experience, and the effect will surely be to make our *interest* in the novel a little more what it had for some time threatened to be – a serious, active, inquiring *interest*, under protection of which this delightful study may, in moments of confidence, venture to say a little more what it thinks of itself. (ibid., p. 503; emphasis added)

If fiction is an art, then paying attention to the state of the art, the leading edge of technique, becomes part of the art. The reflexive representation of this interest—the “venture to say a little more of what it thinks of itself”—is tied up with both attention and mode of expression. In short, writing about writing becomes a form of essential experience for the novelist and an essential way of making fiction into more of an art. Such a view suggests that even when it came to his theories, James was far less aloof than he has long been taken to be. Closely attuned to the burgeoning interest in fiction though he was, James must still have been surprised at just how many laborers were soon to offer up the light of their experience.

The “era of discussion” took a step forward in 1887 with the launch of *The Writer* in Boston by the intrepid William H. Hills. Subtitled “A Monthly Magazine to Interest and Help All Literary Workers,” *The Writer* closely echoes the key terms of James’s “The Art of Fiction.” So interesting did literary workers find Hills’s magazine that he soon followed it up with a sister periodical called *The Author* in 1889. In 1891 Besant edged into the game and began “conducting” a periodical also called *The Author* to serve the “organ” for the Society of Authors. The mid-1890s saw *The Editor* (New York: “The journal of information for literary workers”), *The Writers’ and Artists’ Year-Book* (London), and *Bookman*, which introduced best-seller lists to the world in 1895.

Conveying practical advice submerged in the rhythms of working life, these magazines depended on scattered contributors who wrote in from afar. A periodical such as *The Author* not only provided professional advice, but it conferred its own title on the hopeful aspirant who had something to say. One could thus first become an author by writing for *The Author*. Such modes of compilation produced interestingly diverse results. The Boston-based *Writer*, for example, featured all of the following between its covers: lead articles on writing fiction, short stories, “Gossip on Authors,” “Queries,” “Book Reviews” of literary



texts, notices of useful articles in other magazines, and “Helpful Hints and Suggestions.” Here is how the magazine describes what it is looking for:

Readers of THE WRITER are urged to tell for the benefit of other readers what little schemes they [sic] may have devised or used to make their own work easier or better. By a free exchange of personal experiences every one will be helped, and, no matter how simple a useful idea is, it is an advantage that every one should know about it. (Hills 1889, p. 233)

The schemes of the magazines’ readers covered an astonishing array of topics, with nothing too minor to escape notice. Debates raged over the typewriter in particular, whether it was better to invest in buying one and learning to use it, or whether it was wiser to outsource the work. Contributors weighed in on the benefits and drawback of various models and often proposed modifications for the machines such as a “cheap arrangement” for “persons who prefer the type-writer knee-shift at the right” (B.T. 1888, p. 71). Filing systems were likewise much discussed, testifying to the various attempts to manage the deluge of information and turn it to profitable account. Philip G. Hubert, who admitted to collecting “twenty-five thousand newspaper articles and perhaps five thousand magazine articles” over the course of a decade, discussed his “various methods of keeping and filing away for reference” such a colossal bundle of material in “The Filing of Clippings” (Hubert 1888, p. 163). The hazards of the occupation both minor—sleeplessness, writer’s cramp, and methods for removing ink from clothing (clear spirit of camphor does the trick)—and major—libel and copyright infringement—were regularly addressed. Even the magazine’s ads, featuring typewriters, shorthand instruction, and other services for literary workers fell under the general mission of the magazine. As Hills, the editor and publisher of the journal, put it, “Readers of *The Writer* who skip the advertising pages do not get the full value of the magazine” (Hills 1889, p. 228).

Individually, the various tools and tricks of the trade may seem insignificant enough, but taken together, they represent a marked shift in the art of writing. An April 1888 article on “Method Needed in Literary Work” by A. L. Hanscom testifies to the profession’s emerging practical philosophy. “It is no longer necessary,” Hanscom observes, “for a literary man to wear long hair, roll open his shirt collar like Byron, or have the delirium tremens with undoubted regularity” (Hanscom 1888, p. 84). What is

necessary is an undoubted regularity of a different sort, namely a practical method for managing both oneself and one's work that was founded on the solid base of practical knowledge. This knowledge, however, was the possession not of the individual writing alone in a garret surround by half-empty bottles, but of the community of writers at large, a community linked by the magazines.

Besant's *The Author* renders this communal, guild-like aspect with particular clarity, and adds a new dimension to the key term "interest." The Society, founded on the idea that knowledge of the profession could effectively be circulated through face-to-face social interaction, had found itself in need of a new principle of association. The original plan "to hold frequent meetings for the purpose of conference and discussion" had come up against the fact that "a large number of our members live in the country" and so "we could seldom hope to obtain a really representative gathering, and the discussions would have the tendency to drop into the hands of a few, and still be robbed of half their value" (Besant 1890, p. 1). Even if large, representative gatherings had been possible, the Society further realized that discussions would be of little value if those taking part in them were not already informed: "no discussions can have any real value which are not founded on knowledge of the facts. Now, the ordinary member knows little of the facts." What was needed was both a space for discussion and an avenue for the circulation of knowledge.

*The Author* is therefore founded to be the organ of literary men and women of all kinds – the one paper which will fully review, discuss, and ventilate all questions connected with the profession of literature in all its branches. It will be the medium by which the Committee of our Society will inform its members generally of their doings, and it will become a public record of transactions conducted in the interests of literature, which have hitherto been secret, lost, and hidden for the want of such an organ. (ibid.)

Besant's use of the word "interest" in the foregoing adds an additional layer to James's key term, supplementing the aesthetic stimulation of curiosity with concrete material stakes. The turn is often seen to be a vulgar one, but it is worth remembering that Besant's abiding concern in defending the property rights of authors was in protecting the most vulnerable members of the guild from the publishers who regularly exploited them.

Broad though it be, the *interesting* discussions that the expanding “guild” of writers carried on through the periodical press represents only part of the story. The other part was the story, or rather the short story, itself. More than just “organs” for information or venues for critical exchange, magazines offered the ideal training ground for the would-be author as well as a potential means for sustenance. The short story served as the ideal vehicle for uncovering the principles behind making both art and artists. To see how it functioned in this way, however, it is necessary to work against a set of entrenched oppositions that fragment the development of the art form. In this, the story of the short story has seemed to take on the formal character of its object of study, and while there is not space here to tell the tale in full, some progress can be made toward collecting the pieces.

### THE STORY OF THE SHORT STORY

The oldest divide when it comes to the short story is a national one. American literary historians have claimed the short story as a genre that was distinctly theirs, tracing it back to Irving, Hawthorne, Melville, and (especially) Poe. Its development, its theorization, and even its commercial viability are taken to long precede the arrival of fictioneering. Whatever dramatic increase the close of the nineteenth century saw in the production of short stories can simply be attributed to the increased demand for a preexisting product brought on by the magazines. The craze for short stories was, on this view, simply an intensification of hunger for an already well-defined genre. From other angles, however, a different, if somewhat overlapping, binary takes hold between the short story as mass-market commodity and modernist art. Here, the literary short story is considered the modernist genre “*par excellence*,” and insofar as it rises to an art, it does so at the hands of James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, and their continental predecessors.<sup>7</sup> Other writers have received critical attention, but only in so far as they exhibited proto-modernist, and anti-commercial, tendencies. Dominic Head, for instance, argues “the short story shows itself, through its formal capacities, to be a quintessentially modernist form” (Head 1992, p. xi). In Adrian Hunter’s view, “In many respects modernism has been, and remains, the short story’s centre of gravity—and not only in academic criticism” (Hunter 2007, p. 4). Modernist “innovations,” Hunter continues, “most notably the ‘epiphany,’ have assumed the status of first principles

for aspiring writers of short fiction, not to mention the professionals who teach them on creative writing courses throughout the English-speaking world" (*ibid.*).<sup>8</sup>

Contrary to these abiding ideas, a more continuous development of the short story comes into focus when the genre is connected to the discussion initiated in the "Art of Fiction" debate and carried on afterward with considerable vigor in the magazine culture. Long before the epiphany had come to assume its lofty position, fictioneers had carefully elaborated other first principles and uncovered a trove of "secrets" about the form, and they did so in venues that strongly link the British tradition of the short story with the American one, making for a phenomenon that spans the Atlantic. Importantly, what was elaborated was not merely theoretical but rather a comprehensive practical poetics based on experiment and experience. The direct connection between the short story and the "Art of Fiction" debate is easily overlooked if only Henry James's point of view is the only one represented, but it comes into ready focus if the discussion is followed just a step further. Brander Matthews, whom we have already seen eavesdropping on the "Art of Fiction" debate, had his own contribution to make to it when he noted that, "with all its extension, the discussion did not include one important branch of the art of fiction: it did not consider at all the minor art of the Short-story" (Matthews 1885, p. 366). Following up on this oversight, Matthews added, "it has seemed to the present writer that there is now an excellent opportunity to venture a few remarks, slight and incomplete as they must needs be, on the philosophy of the Short-story" (*ibid.*). Having seen his opening, Matthews would make the most of the opportunity, and the short story would become more than a minor art.

A key member of the generation of literary scholars who pushed back against the philological model of research, Matthews championed the short story in an eclectic body of work. Although primarily an academic, serving as a professor of literature, and later of drama, at Columbia, he did make some notable experiments of his own in short fiction. While Matthews's own literary output was slight, he was friendly with many better-known writers including Besant, eventually going on to work with him to promote the 1891 copyright agreement between England and the United States. Matthews also later put together an early anthology (1907) of short fiction similar to the classroom texts that would come to prominence in the middle of the twentieth century.

Matthews's most important work by far, however, was "The Philosophy of the Short-story" which introduced (or re-introduced) some of the key terms that fictioneering would take up as it turned to the short story. He borrowed much of it from Poe; even the title of directly echoes "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846). Matthews, however, did not simply rehash Poe; he virtually resurrected him within the English-speaking world, elevating him as to nothing short of the "patron saint of the short story" and belatedly validating his vision of short fiction as the supreme modern literary art form, one both lucrative and aesthetically rigorous (Levy 1993, p. 10). Until "The Philosophy of the Short-story," few in the English-speaking world paid attention to Poe or his theories.<sup>9</sup> The author and scholar Fred Lewis Pattee, with only slight exaggeration, attempted to correct the record early on, arguing that

Poe's influence had been almost nothing. There is no evidence in all the critical writings of the mid-century or in any of the literary correspondence of the time that a single reader in 1842 had seen his review of Hawthorne or that anyone could profit at all from the brilliant technique of his *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. For a generation after his death his tales were mentioned only as terror-compelling things, strange exotics standing gruesomely alone and almost to be regretted among the conventional creations of American literature. (Pattee 1923, p. 145)

Pattee's claims are born out at the economic as well as at the aesthetic level. As Dean Baldwin demonstrates, "it is chiefly in retrospect that the American short story appears healthy." The genre "rose and fell fitfully with the economics of publishing," emerging in "the 1830s when the flood of imports drowned the American novel ..., but it subsided when the importers and reprinters foundered" (Baldwin 2013, p. 8). Only in the 1880s were the economics of publishing, the availability of an eager public, and the interests of writers suitably aligned for experiments in fiction to flourish, and such a confluence obtained in both Britain and America.

Ironically, in his brief history of the form that so elevated Poe, Matthews would largely erase himself from literary history. Nonetheless, Matthews was instrumental in establishing the short story as genre unto itself and is the crucial hinge between British and American traditions. Something of a story about stories, "The Philosophy of the Short-story"

was a tale often repeated. As is the case with both Besant and James, who would both revise and republish their respective “Art of Fiction” pieces, Matthews revisited his essay several times over. He first published a brief—and anonymous—sketch in the *Saturday Review* (London) in 1884, before bringing out an expanded edition in 1885 in *Lippincott’s*. He then included it in an essay collection from 1888 before finally publishing it as a stand-alone volume featuring a new preface and an appendix that included excerpts from Poe’s critical writings in 1901. Its most lasting influence was to make writing the short story a *more* self-conscious endeavor. It was the ideal genre for the aspirant who was learning how to write fiction because “its brevity makes its composition simpler for the ’prentice hand” (Matthews 1885, p. 371). “Though the Short-stories of the beginner may not be good,” Matthews continues, “yet in the writing of Short-stories he shall learn how to tell a story, he shall discover by experience the elements of the art of fiction more readily and, above all, more quickly than if he had begun on a long and exhausting novel” (ibid.). Matthews’s concern with the process of writing is perhaps even more evident in the way he applies Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition” to fiction. The few scholars who take Matthews at all seriously make virtually no mention of the fact that Poe’s essay is an account of writing poetry, one that attempts to render the process as a highly ordered one subject to conscious intervention. “The Philosophy of Composition” was a direct rebuke, after all, of “writers – poets in especial – [who] prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy.” The central thrust of Poe’s essay is to “detail, step by step, the processes by which” his poem “The Raven” “attained its ultimate point of completion” and to “render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referrible [sic] either to accident or to intuition” (Poe 2004, pp. 676–677). It is notable in itself simply that Matthews brings prose fiction under the same kind of attention given to poetry, but it is even more crucial that he suggested the short story as the point to which it could be applied. In drawing the distinction between the novel and the short story, Matthews was outlining different modes of composition; if fiction was indeed an art as Besant and James had insisted, Matthews suggests that their contention could best be realized in the short form because it requires the greatest technical exactness. The technical emphasis also drives the distinction between journalism and the short story, as Matthews was at equal pains to distinguish the true story from the “sketches” so often found in “English monthly magazines and in the Sunday editions of American newspapers” (Matthews 1885, p. 368).

As opposed to the Short-story, which “is a high and difficult department of fiction,” the “story which is short can be written by anybody who can write at all; and it may be good, bad, or indifferent, but at its best it is wholly unlike the Short story” (ibid., p. 367). The distinction between literary art and mere narrative journalism here clearly rests not so much on inherent generic qualities as on the capacities of the writer, ones best developed by the concentrated work of composition.

The gains yielded by such vigorous exercise of the prose form could later be applied to the novel, making the longer form more artistic still. “Indeed,” Matthews announces, “the present excellence of the American novel is due in great measure to the Short story; for nearly every one of the American novelists whose works are now read by the whole English-speaking race began as a writer of Short stories.” Matthews thus thought of the short story as both an end in itself and as a form of practice: “The physical strain of writing a full-sized novel is far greater than the reader can well imagine. To this strain the beginner in fiction may gradually accustom himself by the composition of Short-stories” (ibid., p. 371). The idea that the short story is a natural starting place for the aspirant writer may well seem obvious today in part because it has become the default pedagogy of creative writing programs, but Matthews’s assertion of the fact represents a significant rethinking of the short story that both depends on the idea that fiction is an art and helps further realize that idea by specifying its ideal venue of training. In reviving Poe and in articulating the short story as the ideal form of artistic training, Matthews broadened the discussion of artistic process. In the wake of this particular contribution to the “Art of Fiction,” the short story would go on to become, in Henry James’s phrase, “an object of such almost extravagant dissertation” in the era’s periodical culture (James 1898, p. 652).

If the short story had not at first been considered in the “Art of Fiction” debate, it made up for the neglect by occupying a leading role in any discussions of the art in the subsequent decade and a half. In the years after Matthews had published “The Philosophy of the Short-story,” the genre was approached from every possible angle. From its inception, William Hills’s *The Writer* frequently featured articles on the topic. 1888 alone featured Emily Wheeler’s “The Deceitful Short Story,” William Perry Brown’s “My Struggle with the Short Story,” Virginia G. Ellard’s “How to Write a Story” and A. M. Gannett’s similarly titled “How to Write Short Stories,” in addition to a wealth of quick tips and

helpful hints. The first-named essay notably argued for the central importance of revision while the second highlights the difficulty of the form while conceding that “a ray of hope to sustain the young writer in his efforts” is that “in no other field of literature is success so directly a result of cultivation and determined zeal; for there is a literary mechanism about the work, which cannot be disregarded, and the secret of which can be acquired only by patient and persistent study” (Ellard 1888, p. 239). Gannett’s piece, by contrast, tells a story of its own by following the progress of an anonymous “lady who is rapidly winning a name as a writer of capital short stories” by revealing her hard-won secrets of success (Gannett 1888, p. 86). Similar columns with less anonymous writers giving their trade secrets away would become a regular feature of *The Writer*. The most emblematic of such stories might come from Horatio Alger, who explained the principles of his success in “Writing Stories for Boys,” a multi-part sequence of articles that unfolded month-by-month in 1896.

Other periodicals catering to literary workers were similarly larded with advice articles. The March 1897 American edition of *The Bookman*, for instance, gave Jane Barlow, Robert Barr, Harold Frederic, and Arthur Morrison each a chance to weigh in on “How to Write a Short Story.” Among the contributions to periodicals of a broader audience, essays by Frederick Wedmore (*Nineteenth Century*, 1898), Bret Harte (*Cornhill*, 1899), and Henry Harland (*Academy*, 1897) gained enough notoriety to feature in discussions of the short story for years to come, while *Lippincott’s* gave Frederick M. Bird the chance to take the inverse tack in his “Magazine Fiction and How Not to Write It” (1894). Poe, suddenly resurrected, featured in many discussions, and copies of his Hawthorne essay and his “The Philosophy of Composition” circulated both in extracts and full reprint. When *The Critic* selected the “Twelve Best American Short Stories” of all time in 1897, both “The Gold Bug” and “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” made the list. Meanwhile, short story contests for the living sprung up across Britain and America, featuring at every level, from the most provincial newspapers to the widest circulation weeklies. Magazines like *The Writer* and *The Author* were careful to bring the biggest prize contests to the attention of their readers, just as they also noted key literary articles that appeared elsewhere in the press. Then, of course, there were the stories themselves, a seemingly fair proportion of which were fictions about writing fictions. Henry James’s are the most well-known now, but not the best-known then, likely in part because of



his struggles with “compression,” that central virtue of the short story. Besant seemed to offer a new collection of stories every year, several of which featured writer protagonists. Though not a short story, his longer Künstlerroman, *All in a Garden Fair* (1883), which was aptly dubbed an optimist’s *New Grub Street*, gained Rudyard Kipling’s everlasting gratitude for pulling him out of a period of profound depression in 1886.<sup>10</sup> Among the bumper crop of self-reflexive *fin-de-siècle* stories, Carolyn Wells’s satiric “The Vivisectionist” (*Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*, 1896) and Vernon Lee’s “Lady Tal” (1892) bear particular mention as both women offered their own contributions to the art of fiction discussion. Lee’s stately “On Literary Construction” appeared in *The Contemporary Review* in 1895, while Wells would write what was the first full-length how-to book on mystery and detective stories in 1913 as part of J. Berg Esenwein’s “How-to Write” line of handbooks. In some ways, *Technique of the Mystery Story* might well be considered the first work of sustained criticism in the genre, albeit from a fictioneer’s perspective.

The intertwining of the short story and discourse about the short story—most notably about how to produce it—complicates the usual picture where its form, at least in its pre-modernist phase, is seen chiefly in terms of its commodification. To argue that the “single effect” form of short stories “facilitated the short story’s easy consumption” ignores the very difficult efforts of composition that lie behind the commodity itself (Chan 2007, p. xi). In fact, the ease of consumption was something that the discourse of fictioneering significantly troubled. The interested reader, of which there were a great many, did not simply consume the story. Rather she read it, clipped it, filed it away, studied it, dissected it, imitated it, and then attempted to exceed it. The anonymous lady writer of “capital stories” profiled by A.M Gannett proceeded thusly:

She selected those stories in *The* – which are best written, using them for her models. I do not mean that she copied or imitated. Far from it; but she studied them, learning the secret of their worth, just as an artist studies a fine picture or a bit of landscape, not for reproduction, but to get the key for producing beauty himself. (Gannett 1888, p. 86)

These sample stories she kept before her, checking them again and again to see whether she was “approaching her models” (ibid.). Used in such a way, the short story, such an absolutely central feature of the

late nineteenth-century periodical press, offers a quite different form of interaction than that of the “shocked” passive consumer.

Moving the focus of attention from finished products (stories) to the acts of production that they both required and inspired thus permits a reading that goes against the grain of scholarly work on late-Victorian and early twentieth-century periodicals focused on how the magazine marketplace commoditized fiction and dictated the poetics of the short story by way of economic imperatives. Without denying such imperatives altogether, we can nonetheless remember that periodicals and newspapers from the mid-1880s onward proved to be not only spectacular economic engines that provided a forum for fiction unprecedented in both circulation and remuneration, but they also served as a site of literary instruction and apprenticeship. The periodical press was a highly networked, self-organizing field that promised news both fictional and factual, and also provided instruction on how to make news anew by, for instance, ripping a story from headlines, running it through the lens of personal experience, shaping it according to that month’s column on “single-effect stories,” and submitting it to next month’s contest. Advice on writing fiction circulated by both the same mode—writing—and the same avenues of publication—the periodical press—as their subject, making for a strange classroom indeed. To catch the texture of learning fiction by subscription more fully, I turn in the next section to the exemplary single case study of *Atalanta* one of the many “classrooms” on offer in the magazines, and one that notably aims to open its seats for the “girl” writer.

### ATALANTA’S SCHOOL OF FICTION

*Atalanta* debuted in 1887 under the editorship of W. T. Meade as a six-penny monthly literary magazine for girls and young women, aimed at rivaling the best content of other leading literary monthlies.<sup>11</sup> Meade, who was herself a leading author of girl’s school stories, used her credentials and connections as a writer to compile an impressive list of contributors including Christina Rossetti, Charlotte Yonge, Frances.

Hodgson Burnett, Margaret Oliphant, Robert Louis Stevenson, H. Rider Haggard, and even Walter Besant. Meade did not simply solicit established names, but rather used the venture as, in Janis Dawson’s words, “a unique chance to advance women’s interests in the male-dominated literary marketplace” by actively seeking the talents of young women writers and publishing them alongside established, well-respected

authors (Dawson 2013, p. 478). Meade, in other words, gathered talent as a means of cultivating it among her own readership.

Such an effort is most clearly apparent in the early contributions from Besant, who offered a two-part essay “On the Writing of Novels.” While specifically addressing the target audience, Besant spends most of the first part rehearsing points he had already covered elsewhere. He does, however, notably recommend the writing of short stories as a form of practice and, anticipating Virginia Woolf, also discourses on the capital need for young women to find a space of their own to write in. Having become progressively more interested in issues of literary property, Besant concludes the first part by forcefully warning girls off paying to have their own novels published. The second part more interestingly attempts to stage the thought process of a writer who has mastered the basics. While conceding that the “practised artist” will work more instinctively, Besant stages the invention and composition of a novel from start to finish. While the focus is, as the article’s title indicates, on the novel, Besant insists that his student work on “what is called a one-volume story” so that the entire process can be approached consciously, thus more effectively serving as a teaching tool (Besant 1887–1888b, p. 370). The one-volume novel, he continues, is “a story which may be told in about 60,000 words, and may be divided into about fifteen or twenty chapters — the latter for choice, because the division into short rather than long chapters is a sovereign specific for the common tendency to sprawl, and instructs, moreover, in the arrangement of the incidents” (ibid.). Having established the frame, Besant leads his students through the deliberate decisions that will need to be made at every stage in the outlining and composition, from choosing a setting, to doing research, to creating characters, to writing with style. In following the process through, Besant adds flesh to the more general principles he had previously outlined. Perhaps from the influence of short story technique, Besant’s chief stylistic recommendations emphasize compression and selection:

Reserve explanations. As regards these, indeed, remember that though it may be necessary for you yourself to know all about your heroine — the history of her early childhood, her favourite puddings, and even her relations with the dentist — your readers want to know little more than that she lived and moved in certain circles.... Explanations there must be, but they may often be conveyed bit by bit, with a little dialogue, with a line here and a paragraph there, so as to inform the reader of anything

necessary. As to dialogue, remember that your characters should reveal themselves in dialogue as much as in action. They must speak as they think, each after his own manner. It is true that in real life most people seem to speak with the same forms and fashions and formula [but] you must [...] in dialogue [...] exaggerate: your talk must be crisp, it must never drag, and above all it must not be too long. (ibid., p. 374)

In the end, Besant's article very much resembles Poe's approach in "The Philosophy of Composition," where he offers "a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought" that go into constructing an artwork. While Poe chose to do so with his own "The Raven," Besant, by contrast, takes James Payn's *The Confidential Agent* for his example, aiming to supply his students with a technique that they can employ on their own:

the beginner will do well to study the slower and more certain methods above indicated. Let her take other novels, and subject them to a similar analysis, first finding the central idea, and then considering how the story has been evolved, filled with characters, provided with incidents, treated dramatically, and, above all, made interesting and exciting. (ibid., p. 373)

Besant's method was not the only one on offer at *Atalanta*, which aimed to supply its readers with instruction in literary method in even more explicit ways.

From the first issue, the magazine featured a "Reading and Scholarship Union" in which subscribers under the age of twenty-five could compete for a variety of scholarships and prizes.<sup>12</sup> The simplest contest revolved around "Search Passages from Literature," essentially an ancestor of passage identification exam questions, where the reading not only had to identify the source of the excerpt but also both the speaker of the lines and the context in which they occurred. Passages ranged across classic and contemporary literature; the first issue, for instance, featured excerpts from Chaucer and Milton but also from Austin Dobson. More involved were the "Reply Papers." Here, readers wrote short, follow-up essays to the professional piece of criticism that featured in the issue. For the first issue, readers were to reply to Andrew Lang's piece on Sir Walter Scott, to read *Guy Mannering* as a follow-up, and then to respond by answering either of the two following questions:

I. What seems to you to have been Scott's Ideal of a Prose Romance?

## II. Discuss the Plot of Guy Mannering.

Instructions further stipulated, “Readers are free to select for answer either of the above questions, or to answer them both. But their Papers must not exceed in any case 500 words. Quality, not quantity, will be the test of excellence” (Scholarship Competition Questions 1887–1888, p. 54).

The most interesting of *Atalanta’s* competitions, however, appeared as part of the “School of Fiction.” Essentially an 1892 expansion of the Reading Union, the School offered a monthly lesson on a select aspect of fiction, accompanied by competitive creative exercises. The first installment of the school was a lesson on “Style in Fiction” by W. E. Norris. Norris notes that “The art of writing fiction has of late years been made the subject of innumerable articles by persons most, if not quite all, of whom are doubtless competent and well-informed,” but he departs from what he sees as the settled dogma on the topic when he urges “the main thing” is not “to have a story to tell” but rather that the writer “should be able to tell it” (Norris 1892–1893, pp. 59–60). Norris repeatedly emphasizes the need for practice in the art of style arguing against the idea that it is an inherent possession of every person:

the beginner who essays, without preparation or apprenticeship, to tell his story in his own way will very soon discover that that is precisely what he cannot do. The words, some how, will not come; or, if they do, they come in a manner palpably and grotesquely inadequate; the sentences are clumsy, tautological, badly rounded, and jar upon the ear; the effect produced is very far from being the effect contemplated. The tyro, in short, finds out to his sorrow that writing is not in the least the same thing as talking, and that even so modest an achievement as the production of a novel is, after all, an art, the inexorable requirements of which do not greatly differ from those claimed by other arts. And, indeed, why should they? Nobody would ever dream that they did, were it not that the literary art has no schools, colleges, paid professors, no system of salutary checks to intervene between the student and his public. (ibid.)

Norris’s central point is that “novels do not give pleasure or meet with acceptance simply and solely by virtue of their subject-matter” but rather from the form in which they are expressed, and which must be mastered in the same manner as the other arts. “The knack of manipulating language has to be mastered,” he continues “just as that of swimming, riding,

shooting, and playing cricket has to be mastered, and that preliminary failures are more or less a matter of course.” The novelty of Norris’s feature, however, is that the sorts of exercises needed to begin securing a sense of style immediately follow. The “Studies in Style” prize competition attached to the article offered three choices for a 500-word reply paper:

- A. A Dialogue between two well-known characters. (After the model of Landor’s *Imaginary Conversations*.)
- B. An Account of any Historical Incident—in the style of Macaulay.
- C. Description of an Imaginary Episode; the Heroine has lost her way in a lonely tract of country, and night is approaching. Describe the situation (Studies in Composition 1892–1893, p. 63).

The winning entries paid a guinea for first and a half-guinea for second, while year-end scholarships of £20 and £10 were offered for the finest overall papers.

The School of Fiction ran in this form through the end of *Atalanta*’s sixth volume. In the course of the year, lessons had covered “The Short Story,” “The Historical Novel,” “On the Art of Writing Fiction for Children,” “The Novel of Manners,” and more, each with its accompanying reading recommendations and composition exercises. The novel of manners “lecture,” for instance, featured the suggestion “to read any of the following books: – Jane Austen’s novels, Miss Edgeworth’s *Tales of Fashionable Life*, Miss Ferrier’s *Marriage*, Miss Burney’s *Evelina* and *Cecilia*” (Studies in Composition 1892–1893, p. 135). Meade herself rounded off the course by discussing fiction “From the Editor’s Standpoint,” touching on the “very practical point indeed” of “how best the fiction-writer, when he has produced his work, can dispose of it” (Meade 1892–1893, p. 839). If fiction was an art, it was also a business, and there was a practical method to both. Meade offered a number of useful pointers from her behind-the-scenes perspective on how to place a work of fiction, claiming “there is no better opening for a young writer than to become a contributor to a good magazine” (ibid.). She forbade her charges from resorting “to a sort of false humility” when proposing a submission and offered the forceful commandment not to “send an article to a magazine until you have first looked through at least one of its

numbers” (ibid., p. 840). She also recommended to “fiction-writers who are anxious to obtain magazine work” that they “turn their attention to the short complete story, and to avoid for many a day all attempts at Serial fiction” (ibid., p. 841). In lieu of the usual, follow-up exercises, the scholarship competition for the month was a sort of final exam, calling for a complete “ORIGINAL STORY” of less than 4000 words with the winner to be published in the magazine and paid at the usual rate (Scholarship Competition 1892–1893, p. 842).

## CONCLUSION

A suspicious reading of fictioneering’s elaboration through the periodical market is certainly possible, exposing the various exercises, instructions, and advice as so many subtle ways of coaxing an individual into deeper patterns of commodification. It would make for somewhat nervous going, considering how closely the pedagogical practices of literary studies resemble those outlined above, not to mention that fictioneering got there sooner and offered its brand of education more cheaply and more widely. A more charitable reading might find in fictioneering’s undeniable—but also crucially undenied—immersion in commerce the opportunity to find an imagination not paralyzed by onslaught of the news media, but stimulated by it. This explicitly acknowledged connection between commerce and art offers a rare window of observation. Paul Delaney has, on this point, argued that “studies of authorship as a profession, and of the literary marketplace in general, have not been well integrated with what is inside the covers of books that are bought and sold – except for the inadequate idea that books simply reflect class interests” (Delaney 2002, p. 13). By contrast, the fictioneer, having made her own study of authorship, knowingly brings these two competing impulses together in her own practice. The record of that practice, however, is best accessed not by reading it back out of the finished works, but rather by catching her at work. In openly acknowledging that writing is *work*, however, it is important to avoid error of turning literary labor into labor like any other. Of late, many have been tempted by the theoretical bridge that makes all art into a kind of work and adopts, or rather extends, the economically inflected material analysis that has generally governed approaches to mercantile side of literary activity. Scholars charting the emergence of the mass market for fiction at the end of the nineteenth century, in which

fictioneering features so prominently, have long resorted to the explanatory models borrowed from economics and the work of Pierre Bourdieu has stimulated a reawakening of such approaches. Assuming “certain basic continuities between economic behavior” and the behavior of artists and other “players on the fields of culture,” scholars have followed Bourdieu in extending economic calculation well beyond the monetary realm (English 2008, p. 4). Such calculation comes to include “*all* the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as *rare* and worthy of being sought after in a particular formation” (Bourdieu 1977, p. 178).

In one such study of the late nineteenth-century periodical market, Winnie Chan argues in *The Economy of the Short Story* that the market itself “developed the modern short story genre” because it “compelled writers to play by its rules,” which, however mutable they may appear to be, were nonetheless “governed by multiplying communities of taste” (Chan 2007, pp. xxiii, 4). The periodicals in the market work as both agents that “construct” such communities and as “sensitive seismographs of taste” that register the precise demands of the various readerships, thus creating the very effects that they so sensitively gauge. Whether such an argument simply illustrates its own assumed theoretical apparatus is less the point than the way in which such an approach entirely empties the work of writing—and more importantly of learning to write—of its specificity and installs instead a model of perfectly rational, but essentially unconscious, rule following in its place. Learning to write means simply acclimating oneself to the demands of one or the other of the periodicals so as to maximize one’s utility. In the case of mass-market writers, they simply acquire a “market understanding of literature of literary production.”<sup>13</sup>

To approach literary production by way of cultural economics, however, is to fix in advance the ontology of the mass marketplace, committing ourselves ahead of time to the idea that it is populated by individual actors who make rational—if intentionless—choices in the making, buying, and selling of fiction and literature, often without knowing that they are doing so. It little matters what an individual knows or believes they know about the marketplace, much less about “art”; in fact, the system works more cleanly by discounting any knowledge that the agent might claim to hold and suggesting as Bourdieu does, that practical mastery works on preconscious, bodily level. Those that possess this so-called a “market understanding of literature” actually understand



nothing at all, but have rather perfectly and effortlessly internalized the demands of commercial capitalism. The same goes for the high-cultural artists who have internalized not the dictates of the mass market, but those of the “loser wins” market.

Such studies treat intention, when it comes to playing the literary field, precisely the same way the New Criticism treated intention in the writing of the works. Both are simply presumed to be neither desirable nor available. In emphasizing that an individual’s practical mastery of the literary field consists in a learned ignorance, Bourdieu’s theory of practice entirely discounts that individual’s “discourse” about her own field (and assumes, in fact, that it is misleading) (Bourdieu 1977, p. 19). Yet this move does not discount intention altogether but simply offers a substitute for it. As Walter Davis once pointed out: “The interpreter who rejects intention is forced covertly to supply an informing principle analogous to it in order to make coherent interpretation [...] possible [...] Intention is unavoidable. The only question is whether we use the artist’s intention or supply one of our own” (Davis, quoted in Noël-Thomas 1992, p. 19). The intention assumed by Bourdieusian-inflected analyses generally manifests as a form of the principle of “utility maximization,” in the ringing phrase of classical economics. Ironically, it is not the hack writer desperately trying to earn a living but rather the materialist literary historian who ultimately holds the “market understanding of literature,” and whatever veneer of hard-headed theoretical rigor this model promises, its validity is at best unproven—and likely unverifiable. Delaney has suggested that a “model of literary culture as a dominating and relatively impersonal discursive field devalues not only the ontological objectivity of the authors, but also their economic subjectivity as it engages with the systems of literary production” (Delaney 2002, p. 6). Restoring such subjectivity by reading literary workers as if they had some sense of what they were actually up to when writing and selling their works—and could with practice, develop an increasingly better sense of what they were up to—offers an opportunity to recognize the particularity of these authors, but perhaps more significantly, also supplies the chance to rethink the available uses of literature itself from a perspective that attended so carefully to the market in order to make art.

## NOTES

1. The “Age of the Handbook” is from the literary historian Fred Lewis Pattee who, in 1923 and with a deep sense of rue, saw the fictioneering handbook as the dominant feature of his own literary epoch. Pattee’s *The Development of the American Short Story: An Historical Survey* features a very useful bibliography on “Notable Books and Articles on Short-Story History and Technique” that interestingly concludes with “1923: Fred Lewis Pattee, *The Development of the American Short Story: An Historical Survey*” (Pattee 1923, p. 378). For Pattee, the rise of the how-to handbook apparently marked the end of literary history, making his own work more of an elegy than a survey.
2. As Scholes and Wulfman note, even *Poetry*—“that ideal example of the little magazine”—had some advertising including a notable full-page ad for J. Berg Esenwein’s *The Art of Versification*. Esenwein was the mogul of the fictioneering manual, offering a line that included nearly half a dozen how-to works on fiction in its various forms, the volume on the poetry, a how-to manual on writing for the movies, and even *The Art of Public Speaking*, co-authored by none other than Dale Carnegie (Scholes and Wulfmann 2010, pp. 36–37).
3. The revised (and now standard) version appeared four years later in *Partial Portraits*.
4. Until quite recently, it was fairly difficult for anyone without ready access to a research library to even access Besant’s essay. As David Lodge noted in his 1995 talk “Creative Writing: Can it/ Should it be Taught?”: “Everybody interested in the subject knows James’s essay, but not many have read the text which provoked it, for it is quite difficult to obtain” (Lodge 1996, p. 172). Within literary criticism, James’s essay has long been thought to stand entirely on its own, with his brief summary of Besant’s views serving as a more than sufficient explanation.
5. For reasons that will become clear, I quote from James’s original version of the essay; most citations refer to revised version first published in his 1888 *Partial Portraits*.
6. This demand is even more emphatic in the magazine version. In the revised version, he substitutes “sincere” for “interesting” in the line toward the end of his essay that reads “But the only condition that I can think of attaching to the composition of the novel is, as I have already said, that it be interesting” (James 1884, p. 520).
7. Angeliki Spiropoulou suggests that the short story genre is “often considered the modernist form *par excellence* due to its constitutional fragmentariness and elasticity” (Spiropoulou 2015, p. 76).
8. It is worth pointing out that “epiphany” itself only came into currency with the publication in 1944 of *Stephen Hero*, wherein Joyce offers his

- now-famous definition, and that it only becomes a broadly applied critical concept in the mid-1960s. While Joyce's stories were studied from early on in MFA workshops, close attention to their use of epiphanies only appears to begin in the 1970s. The critical obsession with epiphany came long after the revolution in form. Consider that in the first edition of *Understanding Fiction* (1943), Brooks and Warren include only "Araby" and they do so in the final catch-all chapter on "Special Problems." Far from a central principle, the epiphany was for a long time a special case.
9. Famously, and as Matthews was aware, Poe had become influential in France owing to the efforts of Baudelaire, but his effect there proved more decisive in poetry. By way of Carl Grabo's fictioneering manual on *The Art of the Short Story*, Poe would also exert an influence on the Portuguese-language short story, though not until the twentieth century.
  10. See Dillingham (2005, p. 52) for a brief account of how Besant's novel was Kipling's "salvation."
  11. On this point, see Sally Mitchell, *The New Girls' Culture in England* and Janis Dawson, "Not for girls alone, but for anyone who can relish really good literature": L. T. Meade, *Atalanta*, and the Family Literary Magazine."
  12. To ensure that only subscribers competed, a coupon clipped from the magazine had to be included with each entry.
  13. The phrase is Patrick Collier's, used to characterize the *Illustrated London News*, a periodical that traded in "literary celebrity and the notion of fiction writing as 'a job like any other,' which can be mastered through training and experience" (Collier 2011, p. 2).

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# “You Will Be Surprised that Fiction Has Become an Art”: The Language of Craft and the Legacy of Henry James

*Mary Stewart Atwell*

## INTRODUCTION

In June 1890, J. M. Barrie, best known as the author of *Peter Pan*, published a piece called “Brought Back from Elysium” in the *Contemporary Review*. Though it purports to be a play, it is in fact a parody of a range of literary schools, including the Realist, the Romancist, and the “Elsmerian” Representatives of each of these schools, along with a Stylist and an American, arrange for an interview with the ghosts of Tobias Smollett, Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, and William Makepeace Thackeray. The reader might assume that the living writers have invited the ghosts in order to learn from them, but in fact, their project is just the opposite. As the Elsmerian informs the ghosts, “Since your days a great change has come over fiction [...] and it struck us that you might care to know how we moderns regard you” (Barrie 1890, p. 848).

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Barrie's writers regard them, in effect, as naïve bumblers. The writers assume that the ghosts will be "surprised to hear that fiction has become an art" (ibid., p. 848), so intensely engaged with theory that "there is not a living man in this room [...] who has not written as many articles and essays about how novels should be written as would stock a library" (ibid., p. 850). The ghosts, on the other hand, are humbly aware that they know nothing of this new art; Scott admits that "I was only a child. [...] I thought little about how novels should be written" (ibid., p. 849), while Smollett exclaims: "What novels you who think so much about the art must write nowadays!" (ibid., pp. 853–854). Only Thackeray dares to defy the new masters, remarking "perhaps if you thought and wrote less about your styles and methods and the aim of fiction, and, in short, forgot yourself now and again in your stories, you might get along better with your work. Think it over" (ibid., p. 854).

Informed by studies of the institutionalization of creative writing in the American university, including D. G. Myers's *The Elephants Teach* (1996) and Mark McGurl's massive *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (2009), we might assume that the new masters of Barrie's play write about fiction in order to share the mysteries of technique with the uninitiated, or in other words, to teach. Certainly, the publication history of the writer Barrie labels as the "American" (Henry James) would suggest that he had such an intention. The prefaces that James wrote for the New York editions of his novels were later collected as *The Art of the Novel*, and many of the principles outlined in these essays have had a demonstrable effect on the way fiction writing is taught today.

However, one does not have to read far into James's critical oeuvre to be certain that he would be dismayed, if not horrified, to see his work put to such use. Far from intending to produce a guide for would-be writers, his purpose in explicating the art was to initiate cultivated readers into the secrets of his own technique, thus producing better readers for his own fiction. In this essay, I will juxtapose James's careful delineation of his own technique with another tradition, running from Walter Besant's less-known "Art of Fiction" to the fiction handbooks produced by Percy Lubbock, Joseph Warren Beach, Caroline Gordon, and others. Contrary to James's purposes, these handbooks combine his technical principles with Besant's cheerfully democratic view that nearly anyone could learn to write fiction. This evolution is largely unexplored in the limited scholarship on the history of creative writing, as are its effects.



While acknowledging James’s influence on the ways in which writing is taught, the studies by Myers and McGurl largely sidestep the implications of basing a universally applicable “craft of fiction” on one man’s idiosyncratic practice. The fact that James was explicitly hostile to the concept of a teachable art only adds a new layer to the question of what we say about how we write.

### WHAT IS A “PROFESSIONAL” WRITER?

The central precept of Henry James’s essay “The Art of Fiction,” written in response to Walter Besant’s essay of the same name, is that no prescriptive rules whatsoever can be set for the writer. In terms of subject matter, this argument presents a subtle rejoinder to those who would attempt to restrict the freedom of the writer, believing that art, in James’s words, means “picking a bouquet for Mrs. Grundy” (James 1884, p. 515). However, along with preserving the writer’s right to his *donnée*, James’s version of the art precludes the possibility of establishing a set of principles by which aspiring writers might be guided in their attempts.

Both Besant and James were advocates of professionalization, but in their use of the word “professional,” the two men mean something very different. In his “Art of Fiction,” Besant laments the fact that writers “hold no annual exhibitions, dinners, or conversazioni [...] have no President or Academy; and [...] do not themselves seem desirous of being treated as followers of a special Art” (Besant 1884, p. 6). The same year he published his essay, he sought to remedy this failure of initiative through the founding and promotion of the Society of Authors. Here, Besant was the inheritor of the mantle of Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who tried and failed more than once to establish a professional organization for writers.

James was also a member of the Society of Authors, though perhaps a less-than-enthusiastic one. The same year he was inducted (1888) he wrote to Robert Louis Stevenson in regard to a dinner that the Society had given for American authors, commenting that “I belong to it, and so do you, I think, but I don’t know what it is” (James 1980, p. 240). If James did not know what the Society of Authors was, it was not due to a lack of effort to elucidate their mission. Its three stated aims were “(1) the maintenance, definition, and defense of literary property, (2) the consolidation and amendment of the laws of domestic copyright, and (3) the promotion of international copyright” (Hepburn 1968, p. 42), and the members spent much of their time on issues of legal rights to the

written word, even traveling to Berne to represent the English delegation of the 1886 International Conference on Copyright (Bonham-Carter 1978, p. 128).

When James said that he doesn't know what the Society is, he was likely expressing his dismissive attitude toward its particular definition of professionalism. In an 1895 letter to Edmund Gosse, James writes:

The fact is that authorship is guilty of a great mistake, a gross want of tact, in formulating & publishing its claim to be a "profession". Let other trades call it so—& let it take no notice. That's enough. It ought to have of the professions only a professional thoroughness. But *never* to have that, & to cry on the housetops that it *is* the grocer & the shoemaker is to bring on itself a ridicule of which it will simply die. (James quoted in Salmon 2010, p. 106)

As Richard Salmon argues, the term "professional" "carries at least two distinct connotations" in the letter (ibid., p. 106). James dislikes the kind of professionalism, represented by the Society, that would conflate the writer's profession with that of the grocer and the shoemaker.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, he "wishes to retain a notion of 'professional thoroughness,' absent, he claims, from the works of the self-declared professionals, that escapes reduction to purely economic motives" (ibid., p. 107). As McGurl argues in *The Novel Art*, in his work from this period James was establishing a way of talking about what McGurl calls the "art novel," a novel with a concern for aesthetics new to the English literary scene.

However, the art-novel as practiced by James does not, as McGurl claims, facilitate "brotherhood" among literary artists (McGurl 2001, p. 15). In fact, its aim is very much in opposition to the professional organizations of the period, seeking not to democratize the practice and marketing of fiction writing, but to establish it as a fine art above the understanding of all but a select few. For James, who lived on the proceeds from his fiction his entire adult life, changing the conversation to aesthetics was a convenient way of separating himself from the middle-class writers who catered to the novel-hungry masses. In this context, "art" becomes another way of saying genius: that which is inaccessible to the public at large; that which cannot be acquired through effort and discipline, but only appreciated after the fact.

Besant opens his 1884 essay "The Art of Fiction" by stating the following three propositions:

1. That Fiction is an Art in every way worthy to be called the sister and the equal of the Arts of Painting, Sculpture, Music, and Poetry; that is to say, her field is as boundless, her possibilities as vast, her excellences as worthy of admiration, as may be claimed for any of her sister Arts.
2. That it is an Art which, like them, is governed and directed by general laws; and that these laws may be laid down and taught with as much precision and exactness as the laws of harmony, perspective, and proportion.
3. That, like the other Fine Arts, Fiction is so far removed from the mere mechanical arts, that no laws or rules whatever can teach it to those who have not already been endowed with the natural and necessary gifts (Besant 1884, pp. 3–4).

The inconsistency in Besant’s essay, which James identifies and uses to advance his own argument, is suggested in the puzzling juxtaposition between the second and the third propositions. If fiction can be taught only to those with natural ability, why compose an essay offering advice on the practice of fiction to a general audience? Did Besant believe that only those with the “necessary gifts” would read his work? In fact, as the development of his argument suggests, Besant did not insist very strongly on his third proposition, and may even, by the close of the essay, have disregarded it entirely. In the Appendix, he speaks of the letters he received “every week [...] from young beginners asking for counsel and guidance” (ibid., p. 46). It seems unlikely that every one of the young beginners to whom Besant responded was blessed with natural gifts; indeed, some would question whether Besant himself could boast of these endowments. In content, his essay is couched as a series of practical tips directed less at the creation of fine art than the production of marketable work. In this sense, Besant positions fiction as one of the “mechanical arts,” or in other words, a craft.

While Besant’s rules and pointers in his “Art of Fiction” are too numerous to discuss in full, a few selections will suffice for the whole. He suggests that the public prefers (and one assumes, would rather pay for) happy fiction over depressing fiction:

Let him [the writer] remember that in story-telling, as in alms-giving, a cheerful countenance works wonders, and a hearty manner greatly helps the teller and pleases the listener. One would not have the novelist make

continual effort at being comic; but let him not tell his story with eyes full of sadness, a face of woe and a shaking voice. (*ibid.*, p. 37)

In a discussion of how detail may contribute to the theme or mood of a scene, Besant also recommends what in the twentieth century would come to be known as the “pathetic fallacy,” noting that “the weather, the wind and the rain, with some writers, have been made to emphasize a mood or passion of a heroine” (*ibid.*, p. 15). He advises that young novelists go to the British Museum and pay attention to what sorts of paintings people like; that they carry a notebook to jot down observations; and that they write every day to exercise their technique: “I earnestly recommend those who desire to study this Art to begin by daily practice in the description of things, even common things, that they have observed, by reporting conversations, and by word portraits of their friends” (*ibid.*, p. 23). Underlying these suggestions is Besant’s conviction that the most important rule of fiction writing is to “never go beyond your own experience” (*ibid.*, p. 18), and by implication, that the writer’s experience will be sufficient to the task.

Although Besant’s rules, in their specificity and idiosyncrasy, might provide easy fodder for criticism, James eschews this temptation, pleasantly asserting that, “there is something very encouraging in his [Besant’s] having put into form certain of his ideas on the mystery of story-telling” (James 1884, p. 287). However, as the development of his argument will show, James agrees with very little of Besant’s vision of that “mystery,” and as he draws out his objections, he calls attention to the contradiction at the heart of Besant’s “The Art of Fiction.” If only a writer of genius can succeed, might he not, in his superior judgment, find an exception to any prescriptively determined rules of fiction proposed by Besant? And if these rules do admit of exceptions, what is the use of calling them rules, or of talking about them at all?

It is the general principle of James’s artistic outlook that, when it comes to fiction, no general principles can be maintained. He writes that Besant is mistaken:

in attempting to say so definitely beforehand what sort of affair the good novel will be. [...] The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel [...] is that it be interesting. [...] The ways in which it is at liberty to accomplish this result (of interesting us) strike me as innumerable and such

as can only suffer from being marked out, or fenced in, by prescription. (ibid., p. 292)

Thus, by agreeing with Besant's first proposition, that fiction is a fine art, James counters his second, that it is teachable. In James's view, "the form [of a novel] [...] is to be appreciated after the fact" (ibid., p. 508), a position that effectively dismisses any discussion of the art of fiction by its practitioners. Though he commends Besant for his lessons to young writers, and agrees to offer "some comprehensive remarks [...] to the ingenuous student," the content of those remarks is so very comprehensive that one imagines that they would be of little help:

I should remind him first of the magnificence of the form that is open to him, which offers to sight so few restrictions and such innumerable opportunities [...] This freedom is a splendid privilege, and the first lesson of the young novelist is to learn to be worthy of it. "Enjoy it as it deserves," I should say to him; "take possession of it, explore it to its utmost extent, reveal it, rejoice in it". (ibid., p. 520)

James maintains the position that art should not be limited by prescription throughout his career, no doubt expressing a sincere desire that English writers enjoy the same freedom that he had witnessed among Flaubert's circle during his time in France. This insistence that questions of morality exist quite apart from questions of artistry is presumably the reason why McGurl claims that James is "working [...] with precedents set in France by Gustave Flaubert" when he endeavors "to claim the Anglo-American novel from the domain of popular entertainment and to argue for its potential as what he called 'fine art'" (McGurl 2001, p. 2). Although James's defiance of Mrs. Grundy might well have been influenced by Continental writers of his acquaintance, "The Art of Fiction" puts forward a decidedly English anxiety about what was happening to the great quantities of novels published every year: "It must be admitted that good novels are somewhat compromised by bad ones, and that the field, at large, suffers discredit from overcrowding" (James 1884, p. 291). By elevating his sort of fiction to a fine art, James could separate his own novels from that deluge of "bad ones," and from their writers and readers as well.

In his 1900 *New York Times* essay titled "The Future of the Novel," his anxiety about readership is still more evident. James echoes earlier critics

who inveighed against the sensation novel, as he watches in horror the increase of readers attracted by “the flare of railway bookstalls”:

The flood at present swells and swells, threatening the whole field of letters [...] with submersion. It plays, in what may be called the passive consciousness of many persons, a part that directly marches with the rapid increase of the multitude able to possess itself in one way and another of the book. The book, in the Anglo-Saxon world, is everywhere, and it is in the form of the voluminous prose fable that we see it penetrate easiest and furthest. Penetration appears really to be directly aided by mere mass and bulk. There is an immense public, if public be the name, inarticulate but immensely absorbent, for which, at its hours of ease, the printed volume has no other association. (James 1900)

With its vision of a teeming unrestrained reading public, this passage brings to mind James’s racist observations of black and immigrant culture in *The American Scene* and reveals the latent classism at the core of his interest in promoting fiction as a fine art. This public, like that invoked by the critics of sensational fiction, is also gendered, a willing vessel for its massive, bulky penetrator. Interestingly, James maintained this suspicion about a too-broad and too-feminine readership for the novel despite the fact that he would have benefited from a greater demand for his own fiction. One would assume that though the desire to support himself from his work was important, his desire to establish fiction as an endeavor above questions of money and popularity was more important still.<sup>2</sup>

### ART AS MYSTERY

We can see now why Besant’s promotion of an “art of fiction” was attractive to James, and the methods Besant promulgated so much less appealing. Though Besant refers to fiction as a fine art existing apart from the “mere mechanical arts,” his emphasis on the specifics of literary construction and his eagerness to help aspiring authors, suggests that he held a much more egalitarian view. Not everyone could write good fiction, perhaps, but there were enough people out there with basic ability to make the writing and publication of a handbook worthwhile.

In his “Art of Fiction,” James cordially but firmly disagrees. He calls the art of fiction not a craft but a “mystery,” and though this word can, in an archaic sense, connote a guild or trade organization, it can also, in its more familiar meaning, indicate something that cannot be understood

by the uninitiated. If art is a mystery, above the comprehension of all but a select few, then, as James implied, it is both useless and presumptuous to set out rules for its practice. He maintains this position throughout his career in both public and in private writings. In 1899, he writes to Mary Ward that she is wrong in attributing to him a belief in:

but *one general* "hard and fast rule of presentation" I [...] rather resent, frankly, you attributing to me a judgment so imbecile. I hold that there are five million such "rules" (or as many as there [are] subjects in all the world—I fear the subjects are *not* 5,000,000!) only each of them imposed, artistically, by the particular case—involved in the writer's responsibility to it; and each *then*—and then only—"hard and fast" with an immitigable hardness and fastness [...] acquit me, please, *please*, of anything so abject as putting forth something at once specific and *a priori*. (James 1980, pp. 109–110)

In a quotation from Paul Bourget, Leon Edel records James expressing a similar view: "we agreed that the laws imposed upon novelists by aesthetics resolve themselves into this: to give a personal impression of life" (Edel 1972, p. 89). Finally, in "The Future of the Novel," James writes that, "the form of the novel that is stupid on the general question of its freedom is the single form that may, a priori, be unhesitatingly pronounced wrong" (James 1900).

As we have seen, this refusal of prior standards for the novel, justified on moral and on aesthetic grounds, will stymie any attempt at instruction. Instead of the practical and practicable art of fiction that the opening of his essay seems to promise, we are left, finally, with James's inspiring but vague injunction, "try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!" (James 1884, p. 510).<sup>3</sup>

## THE WRITER AND THE PAINTER

Though many writers, then and now, have used the words "craft" and "art" interchangeably, James's preference for "art" was no arbitrary choice. As discussed, he sought to link fiction with the fine arts, particularly visual art, with its long tradition of cultural prestige. However, he also wanted to use the language of aesthetics to elevate fiction above associations with trade and with the sort of practical pedagogy espoused by Besant. Of the works I examine in this essay, which follow James in

discussing technique in terms of subtlety and complexity, most make a notable return to the language of craftsmanship.

I will begin with Robert Louis Stevenson's "A Humble Remonstrance," written in 1884 in response to James's and Besant's thoughts on "the art of fiction." Next, I will turn to James's prefaces, which set out his views on technique with more comprehensiveness than his previous remarks, while continuing to set tight parameters around the field of fiction. Products of a later era, Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction*, Joseph Warren Beach's *The Method of Henry James*, and early classics of the writer's workshop by E. M. Forster and Caroline Gordon, take certain elements from James's approach and others from the tradition of Bulwer-Lytton and Besant. Describing fiction as a fine art analogous and comparable to music and the visual arts, they also contradict James's opinions in several particulars, all with the goal of making the lessons they impart more accessible to readers.

Stevenson had been highly influenced and even inspired by James, and yet he firmly disagreed with him on the question of whether the "art of fiction" was comprehensible in its finer points by the lay public. As if his purpose was not clear enough from his title, "A Humble Remonstrance," Stevenson announces in the opening paragraphs his intention to quarrel with both writers on several key issues. The first has to do with the phrase "the art of fiction," which Stevenson suggests should more properly be named the art of fictitious narrative in prose (Stevenson 1884, p. 140). But Stevenson also seeks to offer advice to a person he calls "the obtrusive student" (*ibid.*, p. 146), with advice differing markedly from both the practical tips presented by Besant and others, and James's vague "Ah, you must do it as you can!" (James 1884, p. 293)

If Stevenson leans to one side of the debate, it is clearly to James's. They were long-time friends, and Stevenson's opinion of James's abilities as compared with Besant's is evident in the first paragraph, where he speaks of "two men certainly of very different calibre [...] Mr. James the very type of the deliberate artist, Mr. Besant the impersonation of good nature" (*ibid.*, p. 139). However, Stevenson argues, the "deliberate artist" is mistaken when he denies the possibility of prescriptive technical standards for the novel. Stevenson is prepared to offer such standards, which are, in contrast to those of his fellow debaters, both specific enough to be useful and comprehensive enough to be broadly applicable:



Let him [the writer] choose a motive, whether it be of character or passion; carefully construct his plot so that every incident is an illustration of that motive and every property employed shall bear to it a near relation of congruity and contrast; avoid a sub-plot, unless as in Shakespeare, the sub-plot be a reversion or complement of the main intrigue; suffer not his style to flag below the level of the argument; pitch the key of conversation, not with the thought of how men talk in parlours, but with a single eye to the degree of passion he may be called upon to express; and allow neither himself in the narrative nor any character in the course of the dialogue, to utter one sentence that is not part and parcel of the business of the story or the discussion of the problem involved. (ibid., p. 147)

“A Humble Remonstrance” is not intended to be a literary handbook, but Stevenson is intent to demonstrate that it is possible to give a young writer good and useful advice. The extent to which he differs from James on this point can be seen in their disparate use of the comparison of writing to visual art. The metaphor would have been familiar to James’s readers, and James elaborates it in his objection to puritanical strictures that would prescribe certain content, and in doing so prohibit the novelist from truly describing the world as he sees it:

It is still expected, though perhaps people are ashamed to say it, that a production which is after all only a “make believe”... shall be in some degree apologetic –shall renounce the pretension of attempting really to compete with life [...] The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it *does* compete with life. When it ceases to compete as the canvas of a painter competes, it will have arrived at a very strange pass. It is not expected of the picture that it will make itself humble in order to be forgiven; and the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete. Their inspiration is the same, their process (allowing for the different quality of the vehicle) is the same, their success is the same. They may learn from each other, they may explain and sustain each other. (James 1884, p. 504)

More than a hundred years after the founding of the Royal Academy, there could be little doubt that painting was a fine art, and James wished to claim for fiction the same respect and freedom of subject matter accorded to the painter. However, he later admits that the metaphor is not complete after all, as “the painter *is* able to teach the rudiments of his practice. [...] If there are exact sciences there are also exact arts,

and the grammar of painting is so much more definite that it makes the difference" (*ibid.*, p. 508).

One may wonder, however, about the sources of James's evidence for his assertion that the grammar of painting is "so much more definite" Could it not be rather that the "grammar" of fiction had not yet been formulated in a way that was comprehensible to the student? Stevenson does not object specifically to James's declaration that painting is a more exact art than fiction, but his differing perspective on this issue can be seen in his comparison of their methods of argumentation in these complementary essays. He writes that James:

spoke of the finished picture and his work when done; I, of the brushes, the palette, and the north light. He uttered his views in the tone and for the ear of good society; I, with the emphasis and technicalities of the obtrusive student. But the point [...] is not merely to amuse the public, but to offer helpful advice to the young writer. (*ibid.*, pp. 266–267)

We can imagine James protesting that he had no aim of amusing the public, but Stevenson's point is still well-argued. With his return to the pictorial metaphor, Stevenson subtly responds to James's belief that there is no way to talk of "the brushes, the palette, and the north light" in fiction, and therefore no substantive way of helping the young writer in addressing such aesthetic questions. Though Stevenson rejects the phrase "the art of fiction," he is the only one of the three writers to propose a set of principles that can be compared to the instruction that a painter might give his pupil. If fiction is a fine art, as James claims, it may be taught accordingly, and Stevenson advances the discussion of how this teaching might proceed.

We would not want to go too far, however, in extolling Stevenson's desire to make the art of fiction available to the aspiring writer. Stephen Arata argues that Stevenson's investment in romance was in part a reaction to a realism he saw as the language of Besant-esque professionalism, and that he disdained the move to professionalize as "inseparable from the middle classes, that fatuous rabble that he preferred to jest at rather than join" (Arata 2005, p. 196). When compared to James, Stevenson's vision of the path to literary artistry looks accessible indeed, but this is not by any stretch of the imagination Besant's "great army of men and women constantly engaged in writing" (Stevenson quoted in Bonham-Carter 1978, p. 138). Still, the effort to articulate a technical discourse

that would resemble the grammar of painting represented a significant step forward.

## THE PREFACES

Leon Edel tells us that in preparing his complete work to be printed as the New York Edition, James "seems to have had an image of himself as the 'American Balzac'" (324). The edition was the monument by which he would be known to history, and he intended that he should be known as the great and representative novelist of his time. However, in writing the prefaces to the novels and tales he made a decision that was, in a sense, more ambitious: He would explain to his readers exactly what he had done and why he had done it. James makes it clear that his intent was to provide a guide to the understanding of his work, to justify his worth to an insufficiently appreciative public. The prefaces were, in his words, "the history of the growth of one's imagination" (James 1934, p. 47). However, along with charting his development as an artist, the prefaces also address James's concerns about the role of the writer in society.

First, James uses the prefaces to reinforce the conception of the professional writer introduced in essays like "The Art of Fiction." In an earlier era, writers like George Lewes employed homely metaphors of building and workmanship to represent the writer as an artisan, learning his trade and pursuing it in a practical spirit. These metaphors would be taken up again in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Jamesian disciples like Percy Lubbock. James, however, clearly aware of the craftsman trope, gives it a new twist. Discussing the construction of *The Portrait of a Lady*, he remarks that he intended the work to have:

a structure reared with an "architectural" competence. [...] I would leave no pretext for saying that anything is out of line, scale or perspective. I would build large—in fine embossed vaults and painted arches [...] and yet never let it appear that the chequered pavement, the ground under the reader's feet, fails to stretch at every point to the base of the walls. (ibid., p. 52)

Far from a lowly workman, James figures himself as the architect who conceives and executes his plan on a grand scale, constructing a cathedral-like edifice. He is also the illusionist, employing sleight of hand to keep the reader from noticing that the ground under his feet is not quite solid.

Previously, I discussed James's ambivalent attitude toward Besant's brand of professionalism, which threatened to associate the writer with "the grocer & the shoemaker." In the prefaces, he evokes a professional thoroughness while simultaneously making it clear that the elevated writer is no common laborer.

As in "The Art of Fiction," James's conception of the professional writer is made distinct from other professionals in other fields partly because he does not have learn his trade in the usual way, through training and hard work. James reminds us often that he does not have to follow the Besant method of taking notes and developing observational skills to find material for fiction. In the preface to *The Princess Cassamassima*, he explains that he did not need to do research to write about a society of anarchists; all he had to do was walk around the parts of London that his character would frequent:

I recall pulling no wires, knocking at no closed doors, applying for no "authentic" information; but I recall also on the other hand the practice of never missing an opportunity to add a drop, however small, to the bucket of my impressions. [...] To haunt the great city and by this habit to penetrate it, imaginatively, in as many places as possible—that was to be informed. (ibid., p. 77)

This ability to invent without research is essential not only to James, but to all writers. If you don't have it, you simply don't have what it takes, and you won't be able to recognize a great subject even if it drops in your lap: "if you haven't, for fiction, the root of the matter in you, haven't the sense of life and the penetrating imagination, you are a fool in the very presence of the revealed and assured" (ibid., p. 78).

Secondly, James takes advantage of this opportunity to air his grievances with the publishing industry. In *The Method of Henry James*, Beach tells us that James accommodated himself happily to the demands of serial publication, even "rejoic[ing] in it as an opportunity for the exhibition of one's finest skill" (Beach 1954, p. 34). However, James's praise of his editor Henry Harland in his remarks on "The Death of the Lion" suggests, on the contrary, that he could only trust the "artistic intelligence" of an editor who agreed not to set any limits at all.

James repeatedly returns to his dislike for the exigencies of the word count, complaining that editors' insistence that stories fall between six and eight thousand words has prevented the *nouvelle*, a successful and

widely used form in other languages, from flourishing in English. In his account of the writing of “The Middle Years,” James compares himself in his efforts to abide by the word count to “a warden of the insane engaged in a critical moment in making fast an inmate’s straitjacket” (James 1934, p. 232). In this, he presents a marked contrast to fellow author Anthony Trollope who, according to his *Autobiography*, found the limitations imposed by publication so salutary that he kept himself to a word count even when he was not obligated to do so. Only in his remarks on *The Ambassadors* does James change his tune, speaking of his intent to “exploit and enjoy these often rather rude jolts” of the serial breaks (ibid., p. 317). Certainly, though, this is a qualified and somewhat ironic enjoyment. Constraints imposed from without, James tells us, can “operate as a tax on ingenuity – that ingenuity of the expert craftsman which likes to be taxed very much to the same tune to which a well-bred horse likes to be saddled” (ibid., p. 295).

If editors and publishers thought of James as a well-bred horse, he could hope for suitable approbation from only one area: his readers. As I have mentioned, his most obvious and significant intention in the prefaces is to cultivate a judicious appreciation of his own work. James, confident that his fiction marked a departure from previous methods, makes the most of his opportunities to take aim at the novels of the past, perhaps most famously in the passage on “large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary” (ibid., p. 84). In his insistence on judicious economy over looseness of construction, James sounds undeniably Flaubertian. He shows a “preference for [...] the ‘neat’ evocation [...] with fewest attendant vaguenesses and cheapnesses, fewest loose ends dangling,” and repudiates again “the baseness of the *arbitrary* stroke” (ibid., pp. 256, 89).

### THE DEEPLY WONDERING AND THE REALLY SENTIENT

James uses this exploration of his methods to enforce distinctions not only between kinds of novels, but also kinds of people. He tells the reader that “we” are most affected by those characters whose center of consciousness is a sensitive instrument:

The figures in any picture, the agents in any drama, are interesting only in proportion as they feel their respective situations. [...] But there are degrees of feeling – the muffled, the faint, the just sufficient, the barely

intelligent [...] and the acute, the intense, the complete, in a word – the power to be finely aware and richly responsible. It is those moved in this latter fashion who “get most” out of all that happens to them and who in so doing enable us, as readers of their record [...] also to get most. [...] We care, our curiosity and sympathy care, comparatively little for what happens to the stupid, the coarse and the blind; care for it, and for the effects of it, at the most as helping to precipitate what happens to the more deeply wondering, to the really sentient. (ibid., p. 62)

The class implications are not only unmistakable but also are underlined by the comment in the preface to *The Princess Cassamassima*, that the “meaner conditions, the lower manners and types, the general sordid struggle [...] the ignorance, the misery and the vice” that form the background of Hyacinth Robinson’s conversion to anarchism are unimportant in themselves, and only worth noting in the effect they have on the “finely aware and richly responsible” center of consciousness (ibid., p. 62).<sup>4</sup>

The analysis of the center of consciousness also establishes a precedence of genders. In the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, James writes of his audacity in deciding to make Isabel Archer his central character. In Shakespeare, he explains, a character like Portia “matters to Antonio, and to Shylock, and to the Prince of Morocco,” but Shakespeare never asks her to carry the weight of being the audience’s sole interest. Even George Eliot, whose passage on the “frail vessels” of human affection James quotes here, never asks her “Hettys and Maggies and Rosamonds and Gwendolens” to be the center of the narrative.<sup>5</sup> These characters “have their inadequacy eked out with comic relief and underplots” (ibid., pp. 49–50). James, on the other hand, will invest the entirety of the novel in Isabel Archer, braving the “deep difficulty” of making her consistently interesting to the reader (ibid., p. 50). By insisting on the boldness of asking a reader to care about a young woman’s consciousness, James argues implicitly that the default center of consciousness is male, and that he must apologize for—while also celebrating—his decision to go against the grain.

## THE PROFESSIONAL STUDENTS

This insistence on the preeminence of the center of consciousness, the attribution of mental superiority to a class-dependent sensibility, and the condescending remarks about the psychological capacity of young

women would be troubling (certainly to modern readers) in a guide to writing fiction, but it's important to remember that James had no intention of producing such a guide. He never meant the prefaces to be published together and probably would not have been thrilled with Richard Blackmur's decision to name the 1934 edition *The Art of the Novel*. The prefaces read very differently as a descriptive account of one man's experience than as a prescriptive take on how fiction should be written.

Ironically, a metaphor from the prefaces inspired the title of one of the first fiction anthologies to be used in university writing programs—*The House of Fiction*, written by Caroline Gordon and James Tate and published in 1950. This apparent coincidence of aims between James and the twentieth-century American writing program may be one reason why McGurl assumes that James would have been in sympathy with modern teachers of creative writing. A closer look at the way the phrase "the house of fiction" is used in the prefaces will suggest otherwise.

"The house of fiction," James writes, "has in short not one window, but a million; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will." At each of these windows stands a writer. "He and his neighbours are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white. [...] And so on" (*ibid.*, p. 46). Presumably, each of these inhabitants could, like James, write an account of their practice if they chose to do so, describing the singular view from their particular room.

Gordon and Tate, on the other hand, are concerned not with writers as individuals but in the "certain 'constants' or secrets of technique which [...] appear in the works of all the masters of the craft [...] [and] which have been handed down from master to master throughout the ages." They are less interested in the fact that the house of fiction has many windows than in the fact that it has many rooms, allowing students to explore "the basic techniques in systematic fashion" (Gordon and Tate 1960, p. ix). Though Gordon was a devout Jamesian, here she spins the Master's words for her own ends, adapting them to a purpose it is unlikely he would have approved.

It is easy to imagine James dismissing Gordon and Tate's "basic techniques in systematic fashion," but possibly he might have looked with more favor on two earlier books which made use of the prefaces: Beach's *The Method of Henry James* (1918) and Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction*

(1921). Both Beach and Lubbock were earnest admirers of James, and both sought to translate the prefaces into a language that would be more readable for non-scholars. In his introduction, Beach comments that:

deeply interesting as they are, few but professional students would have the hardihood and pertinacity to make their way through these explanatory reviews. [...] It remains for the student to collect and set in order these scattered considerations, to view them in connection with the stories themselves, and, from the whole, to put together some connected account of the aims and method of our author. (Beach 1954, p. 2)

Ironically, these “professional students” setting out to complete the Master’s project of explaining themselves to the public, ended in establishing a vocabulary of technique that made his idiosyncratic practice newly accessible to aspiring writers.

Lubbock’s book is probably the better known, perhaps due to a title which announces its subject as technique in general, rather than James’s technique in particular. Lubbock frequently laments the “long indifference to [...] questions of theory,” which leaves “a reader of novels [...] amazed by the chaos in which the art is still pursued” (Lubbock 1955, p. 197). There is no “received nomenclature” to which critics may refer, “no connected argument, no definition of terms, no formulation of claims, not so much as any ground really cleared and prepared for discussion” (Lubbock 1955, pp. 22, 272). Lubbock aims to reform this perpetual casualness, and James is the “begetter of all our studies. [...] Others [...] had opened the way but the novel in its wayward exuberance had hardly been held to any serious account of its practice till it was called to confront the most magisterial of its makers” (ibid., p. viii). In “The Art of Fiction,” James expresses his regret that “the English novel was not what the French call *discutable*” (James 1884, p. 502); Lubbock and Beach give James the credit for beginning that discussion that he was unwilling to claim for himself.

In terms of method, both Lubbock and Beach follow the principles laid out in the prefaces, though in a considerably more lucid and organized manner. Predictably, Lubbock argues that the novel has experienced a progressive movement from a focus on plot to a focus on character, and he echoes James in his view that the essence of characterization lies in an exploration of the center of consciousness—or, to use Lubbock and Beach’s term, “point of view.” More explicit than James himself, Lubbock



states that "the whole intricate method, in the craft of fiction, I take to be governed by the question of point of view—the question of the relation in which the narrator stands to the story" (Lubbock 1955, p. 251). In his discussion of structure, though Lubbock mentions James's distinction between "drama" and "picture," he also introduces a pair of terms that will wear considerably better. In a passage on *Madame Bovary*, Lubbock remarks that, "I speak of his [Flaubert's] 'telling' the story, but of course he has no idea of doing that and no more; the art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as matter to be *shown*, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself" (ibid., p. 62). "Showing" a story is allied with James's "scenic" or "dramatic" method, and James is the exemplary scenic novelist. In Beach's words,

Thackeray, or Balzac [...] are always *telling* the reader what happened instead of showing them the scene, telling them what to think of the characters rather than letting the reader judge for himself or letting the characters do the telling about one another. I like to distinguish between novelists that *tell* and those that *show*; and when I say that James was a dramatic story-teller, I mean that he was one of those that show through *scenes*. [...] I find the essence of the dramatic, in fiction, in the confinement of the story, like a stage-play, to the "here and now," that is to the particular place and time in which the dialogue is occurring or the characters' ruminations are being carried on. (Beach 1954, p. lxxx)<sup>6</sup>

Lubbock and Beach are drawing here on the distaste expressed in the preface to *The Ambassadors* for "the seated mass of explanation after the fact, the inserted block of merely referential narrative" (James 1884, p. 321). At its most refined, this preference for scene leads to the conversations in James's late novels in which the characters discuss at great length everything the reader might possibly need to know. While these scenes may not be "dramatic" in the familiar use of the term, Beach recognizes that James's method contains the potential for drama by keeping the reader in a "particular place and time" (Beach 1954, p. lxxx).

As Beach's reference to Thackeray and Balzac indicates, the emphasis on "showing" is a mark of James's technical advantage over the novelists of the past. For these critics, James is a *sui generis* scholar of the novel while earlier novelists are simply concerned with telling a story, "taken up to such an extent with their material and their attitude towards it, as to have comparatively little attention left for the niceties of the art in the

disposition of it” (Beach 1954, p. 1). This is a familiar argument, parodied in Barrie’s “Brought Back from Elysium,” and both Lubbock and Beach return to it often. Like James, they scorn the practice of an omniscient implied author commenting on the action. In connection with this offense, Beach mentions everyone from Fielding to Eliot and Meredith, and Lubbock at times makes these novelists sound almost Homeric in their lack of awareness of the technical advantage of choosing a point of view, speaking of “the old, immemorial, unguarded, unsuspecting way of telling a story, where the author [...] imposes no limitation upon his freedom to tell what he pleases and to regard his matter from a point of view that is solely his own” (Lubbock 1955, p. 263). The worst villain in this regard, however, is not James’s bogeyman Trollope, but Thackeray. “Among the great,” he is the only writer

who seems to find a positively willful pleasure in damaging his own story by open maltreatment of this kind; there are times when Thackeray will even boast of his own independence, insisting [...] on his own freedom to say what he pleases about his men and women and to make them behave as he will. (ibid., p. 88)

One can hear Lubbock’s frustration with Thackeray’s habit of referring to his characters as “puppets,” when to Lubbock they are “men and women” with the capacity for independent thought and action. James’s insistence on the scene, though a technical advance in its own right, is also valuable for precluding this kind of treatment.

Though Lubbock and Beach draw heavily on James’s conceptual framework as discussed in the prefaces, each also departs from him in significant ways. Beach is unapologetic about separating out the elements of fiction, giving his chapters titles including “Picture,” “Point of View,” and “Dialogue.” Neither takes the time to deplore the concept of literature as a trade, indicating either that talking about money doesn’t interest them or that they are reconciled to the idea that both novels and guides to the writing of novels are subject to capitalist exchange. Most significantly, while telling us the terms “craft” and “art” are really “one and the same [...] with no real working distinction to be drawn between them” (ibid., p. v), Lubbock announces in the title his own preference for “craft.” In discussing why readers and writers need to understand technique, he turns to the old metaphor of the craftsman, which sounds very different here than James’s vision of an architect building cathedrals:

Nobody can work in material of which the properties are unfamiliar, and a reader who tries to get possession of a book with nothing but his appreciation of the life and the ideas and the story in it is like a man who builds a wall without knowing the capacities of wood and clay and stone. Many different substances, as distinct to the practised eye as stone and wood, go to the making of a novel, and it is necessary to see them for what they are. (ibid., p. 20)

Here, both writer and reader are builders in stone and wood, each complicit in the project of constructing the wall. Lubbock underscores in his own preface that learning the craft of fiction is "homely" work that "holds you fast to the matter in hand, to the thing that has been made and the manner of its making" (ibid., p. v). After James's attempts to establish "the manner of its making" as an exalted pursuit, it is fair to say that he probably would not have cared for Lubbock's return to the humble language of craftsmanship.

Though Lubbock and Beach may not be orthodox Jamesians in every respect, James is still their "only begetter," the reason for their studies and the example that endorses their conclusions. Now that writers like James are composing more complex novels, Lubbock argues that we must train ourselves to be the "cunning," technically informed reader that James wishes for in the prefaces (ibid., p. 253). Lubbock hopes that future readers and critics will follow his example in *The Craft of Fiction* in analyzing the technical properties of the novel:

I can imagine that by examining and comparing in detail the workmanship of many novels by many hands a critic might arrive at a number of inductions in regard to the relative properties of the scene, the incident dramatized, the incident pictured, the panoramic impression and the rest; there is scope for a large enquiry, the results of which are greatly needed by a critic of fiction, not to speak of the writers of it. (ibid., p. 267)

This passage is significant for two reasons. First, it envisions a vibrant discourse on fictional discourse, one that would in fact begin to take shape in the decades after the publication of *The Craft of Fiction*. Second, it suggests that craft is indeed teachable. In the last phrase, indicating that analysis of technique is useful to writers as well as readers, this most devoted of the Master's students gives an entirely different face to his project in codifying and explicating the prefaces.

## “HISTORY DEVELOPS, ART STANDS STILL”

As McGurl demonstrates in *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, in the decades after the publication of the works by Lubbock and Beach, most of the teaching of craft took place in the context of the university. In this contemporary context, James’s distaste for the associations of writing with trade has been effectively sidelined: The majority of teachers of writing make their livings in the classroom, viewing the proceeds from their fiction as a welcome, if inconsistent, supplement to their salary. However, the question of what we mean by the craft of fiction, and where our conceptions of craft can and should come from, is still very much a matter of discussion.

With McGurl’s focus on institutionalization in the United States, he never mentions what is surely a significant moment in the incorporation of the craft of fiction into an academic setting: E. M. Forster’s Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, later collected as *Aspects of the Novel*. After the near-exclusive focus on James in the works by Lubbock and Beach, Forster’s catholicity of reference and freedom from conventional wisdom are striking. He is just as willing to discuss Arnold Bennett’s *The Old Wives’ Tale* as *The Ambassadors* and values plot just as much as character. Though his famous distinction between flat and round characters is often taken to imply the superiority of characters with psychological depth, he himself mentions Dickens as a counter-example, commenting that “his immense success with types suggests that there may be more in flatness than the severer critics admit” (Forster 1927, p. 72). All in all, Forster seems remarkably liberated from the pressure to throw his lot in either with the geniuses and literary artists or with the humble craftsmen. The explanation for this cheerful refusal to join one party or the other can be found in his first lecture, when Forster asks his students to imagine the English writers he will go on to discuss:

not as floating down that stream which bears all its sons away...but as seated together in a room, a circular room, a sort of British Museum reading-room—all writing their novels simultaneously. They do not, as they sit there, think “I live under Queen Victoria, I under Anne, I carry on the tradition of Trollope, I am reacting against Aldous Huxley.” The fact that their pens are in their hands is far more vivid to them. (ibid., p. 9)

This imagined scene of novelists working in the same space, untroubled by the passage of time, will allow Forster to make technical comparisons

between James and Samuel Richardson, H. G. Wells and Dickens, Sterne and Woolf, and to conclude that the craft of fiction does not change—in fact, is impervious to change. “All through history,” Forster tells us, “writers while writing have felt more or less the same. They have entered a common state which it is convenient to call inspiration, and having regard to that state, we may say that History develops, Art stands still” (ibid., p. 21).

Though later writers of literary handbooks have sometimes disagreed with Forster about the methods by which character is constructed, the notion that the principles of craft are ahistorical has become nearly universal. In early standards of the workshop like *Understanding Fiction*, by Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, and in contemporary favorites like Janet Burroway’s *Writing Fiction*, “rules of art” are expressed in declarative statements. The writers are careful to grant that their principles admit exceptions and that every fiction writer must, to paraphrase James, “do it as she can,” but these variations are always credited to the writer’s individual artistic vision, never to historical contingency. This assumption that technique exists apart from social forces makes the literary-historical amnesia suffered by the late-Victorian writers in Barrie’s “Brought Back from Elysium” a constant of our discourse, and may have several ill effects. If technique is eternal, there is no reason for writers of handbooks and teachers of creative writing to refer to anything written outside our borders or before 1950. For students of creative writing, an approach that relies so much on the contemporary and the easily accessible may leave the impression that texts requiring more of an investment from the reader have nothing to teach.

In addition, the lack of curiosity about where and how our notions of craft came to be may impoverish our cultural conversation about fiction. We have seen the way that James’s own classism, racism, and sexism influenced his formulations of concepts like characterization and point of view. In a series of posts on the website of the literary journal *Pleiades*, the novelist and critic Matthew Salesses asserts that the very notion of “‘Pure Craft’ is a Lie”:

The writers of color in [a] workshop where the craft values are white, or the LGBT writers in a workshop where craft values are straight and cis, or women writers in a workshop where the craft values are male, end up in the position [...] where they are told that they need to “know the rules

before they can break them,” but the rules are never only “just craft,” because the rules are cultural. (Salesses 2015)

The discussion of the ideological and cultural underpinnings of the craft of fiction is just beginning, and both students and teachers of writing may fear that the end result will be the decline of a common language. If we cannot agree on what makes a character come alive on the page, how can a diverse community of writers and readers talk about technique at all? However, a more hopeful possibility is that these conversations will enrich our understanding of how race, gender, sexuality, and class privilege have shaped creative writing, not shutting down the discourse, but expanding it by making room for different perspectives.

James’s insistence that fiction was an art was undeniably valuable in opening the field for a complex discussion of its construction. By asserting that technique was both complex and accessible, writers like Stevenson, Lubbock, and Forster then took the first step toward establishing a rich and productive conversation about how fiction is made. The next step will involve a new awareness of the influence of culture, context, and subject position on what we say about how we write.

## NOTES

1. Salmon points out that James also used the Society as a resource, requesting Besant’s advice on periodical publication and hiring the agent A. P. Watt to represent him in the late 1880s. His simultaneous acceptance of and disdain for professional organizations certainly implies that “James’s relationship with Besant’s model of literary professionalism was [...] more ambivalent than the coded distancing of [James’s] ‘The Art of Fiction’ might suggest” (Salmon 2010, p. 108).
2. James may at times have exaggerated his need for money, but his poverty seemed real enough to his friend Edith Wharton, who writes in *A Backward Glance* of the “anxious frugality” on display at Lamb House: “in his daily life he was haunted by the spectre of impoverishment, and the dreary pudding or pie of which a quarter or a half had been consumed at dinner appeared on the table the next day with its ravages unrepaired” (Wharton 1934, pp. 243–244). Wharton also relates an anecdote about a visit to James when he had her suitcases brought to the house on a wheelbarrow, commenting that “he had bought the barrow with the earnings of his last book and hoped that the earnings on the next book would enable him to have the barrow painted” (Powers 1990, p. 18). In the last years of James’s life, Wharton arranged for some of her own profits from Scribner

to be diverted into an unusually generous advance for *The Ivory Tower* (Edel 1972, pp. 476–477).

3. Given that this is perhaps the best-known line from “The Art of Fiction,” it is curious to note that James seems to have borrowed his phrasing from Besant’s specific and concrete suggestion that the aspiring writer carry a notebook to jot down his impressions: “There are places where the production of a notebook would be embarrassing – say, at a dinner-party, or a street fight; yet the man who begins to observe will speedily be able to remember everything that he sees and hears until he can find an opportunity to note it down, so that nothing is lost” (Besant 1884, p. 21). The phrase “nothing is lost,” like “art of fiction,” seemingly meant something different to James than it did to Besant.
4. While arguing that only a character with a certain gentility of soul can make an effective center of consciousness, James also frequently figures secondary characters as domestic help. In the preface to *The Princess Cassamassima*, he states that “my sense of a really expressed character is that it shall have originally so tasted of the ordeal of service as to feel no disposition to yield again to the strain.” In his remarks on *The Portrait of a Lady*, he states that the characters appeared to him “like the group of attendants and entertainers who come down by train when people in the country give a party” (James 1934, p. 53). These remarks highlight the preoccupation with class underlying James’s criticism as well as his fiction, and remind us that the characters with the intelligence and capacity for response to claim an independent existence are a rarity, even in his fiction.
5. Interestingly, James makes no mention of Eliot’s “Dorotheas.” The omission may strike the reader as significant, given James’s well-known admiration for Eliot early in his career, and the fact that Dorothea Brooke undoubtedly occupies the position of the preeminent center of consciousness in *Middlemarch*.
6. The chronology here is rather confusing. Though *The Method of Henry James* was published three years before *The Craft of Fiction*, the remarks quoted here are found in Beach’s Introduction, included in a 1954 reissue of *The Method*. Since the distinction between ‘showing’ and ‘telling’ does not occur in the 1918 edition, we can assume that Beach was influenced by Lubbock’s terminology.

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## CHAPTER 4

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# “Your Successful Man of Letters Is Your Successful Tradesman”: Fiction and the Marketplace in British Author’s Guides of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

*Paul Vlitos*

### INTRODUCTION

If in recent decades the worldwide proliferation of creative writing programs in higher education has suggested (in Mark McGurl’s words) a discipline which is “on the way to becoming a global Anglophone phenomenon” (McGurl 2009, p. 364), the same period has also seen a flourishing of scholarship examining this phenomenon. While D. G. Myers’s pioneering *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (1996) traces the history of the development of creative writing as an academic discipline, McGurl’s *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (2009) explores the effects that such formal and

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institutionalized literary training has had on the fiction produced by those writers who have undergone it—famously suggesting that “the rise of the creative writing program” can be seen as “the most important event in postwar American literary history” (ibid., p. ix).

Building on the work of Myers and McGurl, recent scholarship by Mary Stewart Atwell and Paul S. Collins has endeavored to extend and complicate discussions initiated by *The Elephants Teach* and *The Program Era* in two key regards: firstly, by exploring further the prehistory of the ideas about creative writing generally systematized and promulgated in the postwar creative writing classroom; secondly, by seeking to emphasize the British contribution to such discussions, in the form of the kinds of writing advice offered to aspiring writers during the nineteenth century in the periodical press, in public talks, and (especially toward the end of the century) in literary advice handbooks (see Atwell 2013; Collins 2016).

It is on such handbooks that I shall focus in this chapter, which discusses a number of writing guides published in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Whereas Collins examines such texts in the context of “the development in nineteenth-century America of self-identified instruction in fiction-writing, both in academia and through mass-marketed commercial guides and services” (Collins 2016, p. 3), with the United States from 1826 to 1897 providing his primary focus, Atwell examines how ideas of craft and technique were developed and transmitted in handbooks and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic in the eighty years from 1850. My own focus is on the ways in which British writing guides of the mid-nineteenth, early twentieth century offer not only technical and creative advice but also professional and commercial tips and hints—advising their readers not only how to write but also how to be a (professional) writer. In so doing, I shall suggest, such texts not only reflect, but take active part in contemporary debates about the status of prose fiction as an art form, the relationship between the writer and the marketplace, and what it might mean to be an author.

### AUTHOR’S GUIDES, AGENTS, AND YEARBOOKS: THE LATE-VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN LITERARY ADVICE INDUSTRY

“What do you think I’m writing just now?” asks Whelpdale, a “poor devil” who has “failed as a realistic novelist” in *New Grub Street*, George

Gissing’s 1891 novel of literary life in London (Gissing 1985, pp. 249, 248).<sup>1</sup> The answer is “an author’s Guide”: “You know the kind of thing,” Whelpdale remarks, adding that “they sell splendidly” (Gissing 1985, p. 249). Indeed, scholars including Peter Keating, Christopher Hilliard, John Gross, Michelene Wandor, and James Hepburn have observed the dramatic changes in the literary marketplace and its rapid expansion during the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Gross notes that “[m]agazines and periodicals sprouted up as never before in the 1880s and 1890s, while by the end of the century the London Directory contained the names of over four hundred separate publishing houses” (Gross cited in Wandor 2008, p. 10), which were accompanied by a remarkable flourishing of what Hilliard dubs “the literary advice industry” (Hilliard 2006, p. 20). As instances of this latter phenomenon, Hepburn identifies as the world’s first professional literary agents A. M. Burghes and A. P. Watt, both active by 1880 and rivaled from 1896 by J. B. Pinker and from 1899 by Curtis Brown (Hepburn cited in Keating 1991, p. 71). On a similar note, Keating—whose groundbreaking *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel 1875–1914* (1991) remains the fullest and most detailed account of the relationship between the fiction being written and published in Britain and the “changing business of literature” during this period, and whose work is vital to an understanding of the wider context in which the author’s guides of the period were being produced—records the appearance in 1897 of a publication entitled *The Literary Year Book*, containing “addresses of publishers and literary agents” alongside “essay-length surveys of the year’s publications” and “photographs of fashionable authors” (Keating 1991, pp. viii, 72). By 1902, this had been renamed *The Writer’s Year Book*, and by 1906, it had evolved into *The Writer’s and Artist’s Year Book*, which is still published annually today (albeit without the author photographs) and, as Keating points out, remains “the handbook to which aspiring writers are most likely to turn for reliable information on market requirements and rates of pay” (Keating 1991, p. 72).

In 1883, the Society of Authors was founded and began its increasingly widely publicized efforts to define and defend the concept of literary property, to agitate for the reform of domestic copyright laws, to promote binding laws on international copyright, and, in Wandor’s words, to “demystify the publishing process so that would-be (and already) professional writers could protect their rights to earnings and be armed with information to defend themselves from predatory publishers” (Wandor

2008, p. 98, see also Keating 1968, pp. 27–30). To this same end, in March 1887 the Society would host a day-long conference on the topic of “The Grievance Between Authors and Publishers” (the proceedings of which were later published) during which the most prominent of the Society’s founders, the novelist Walter Besant, would accuse publishers of “selfishness and dishonesty” in their dealings with authors. This claim was followed up on by the Society in two further published works, *The Cost of Publishing* (1889) and *Methods of Publishing* (1890), which attempted to detail the true costs of printing, binding, promoting, and selling a book, and were intended as “aids to the author in negotiating contracts” (Hepburn 1968, p. 77). The same valuable information would also appear alongside much other well-informed advice on matters creative, commercial, and professional in Besant’s *The Pen and the Book* (1899), a real-life author’s guide intended (like Whelpdale’s fictional one) “for the instruction and the guidance of those young persons, of whom there are now many thousands, who are thinking of the Literary Life” (Besant in Collins 2016, pp. 96–100).

#### “NOVEL-WRITING TAUGHT IN TEN LESSONS!”: LITERARY COMPOSITION AS AN ART AND AUTHORSHIP AS A TRADE

“The first of the self-help manuals on writing,” Hepburn records, were such anonymous works as *The Author’s Hand-Book* (1844), *The Search for a Publisher* (1855), and *How to Publish* (1857), issued by vanity publishers in the mid-nineteenth century as “advertisements” for their own services (Hepburn 1968, pp. 22, 23). “In the middle years of the century,” Keating observes, an “important part of the appeal” of such publishers was that they presented themselves as “the friend of authors known and unknown,” a message strongly reinforced in the manuals and handbooks they published. *The Search for a Publisher*, for example, which was “issued for twenty-six years by a series of obscure publishers at several different addresses” and eventually reached eight editions, begins with “a description of the publisher as a figure especially created to be the author’s agent in his dealings with the printer and the public,” offers an account of what it claims are the “typical contractual arrangements between author and publisher,” and then provides a collection of “testimonial letters from contented authors” (ibid., p. 23). As Hepburn comments, given the absence of any practical writing or sound publishing advice in such works it is hard to see them as serving any real purpose other than

“paving the way to the vanity publisher’s door” (ibid., p. 22). One of the major concerns of author’s guides like Besant’s *The Pen and the Book*, in contrast, was to help the aspiring author to avoid allowing themselves to be gulled or exploited, often cautioning their readers to be highly suspicious of any publisher who—for example—expects the author to share the costs of production. “Publishers are purely and simply men of business,” Besant reminds his reader, and “they publish in order to make money” (Besant 1899, p. 146). “Do not,” he therefore cautions, in your dealings with your publisher: “be deluded by the champagne nor the lunch he may offer you,” nor his “plausible words and plausible manners,” and “do not on any account [...] accept as plain truth any and every statement that he may make” (Besant 1899, p. 147). Nevertheless, despite the best efforts of Besant and others to provide more reliable literary advice and to bolster the respectability of the idea of the author’s guide, it is clear that considerable cultural suspicion and skepticism regarding such guides still lingered at the end of the century, as it perhaps lingers still.

Keating has described *New Grub Street*, the ninth of George Gissing’s twenty-nine novels, as an “astute and probing” analysis of the “business of literature,” and a “sociological document of genius written in the form of a novel” (Keating 1968, p. 9). In its depiction of Whelpdale’s inventive attempts to monetize his ability to provide literary advice it pays tribute not only to real-life developments in the cultural marketplace but also the kinds of anxiety such developments provoked among those accustomed to thinking of more traditional relationships between the author, their work, and the marketplace.

In commercial terms, Whelpdale conceives of his author’s guide primarily as “a good advertisement” for his business of “literary advisorship” (offering paid editorial advice on unpublished novels) which he plans to develop into a full-blown school of creative writing, offering “[n]ovel-writing taught in ten lessons!” (Gissing 1985, p. 249). Unlike the services offered by vanity publishers, however, this idea is “no swindle,” according to Whelpdale. He is “quite capable of giving the ordinary man or woman ten very useful lessons” in the practicalities of novel writing and of making a living as a novelist—even if he has never quite managed to achieve this latter feat himself (ibid.). Indeed, Keating notes it was generally thought during this period that “the only person who could possibly bring himself to write such a manual was a failed author” (Keating 1968, pp. 71–72). As we shall see, however, it was not always the case in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that

those who had succeeded in achieving literary success were the least likely to contribute to the advice literature in this field, as both Walter Besant and Arnold Bennett were successful and lauded fiction writers who also wrote author's guides.

Whelpdale's first lesson deals "with the question of subjects, local colour – that kind of thing":

I gravely advise people, if they possibly can, to write of the wealthy middle class; that's the popular subject, you know. [...] I urge study of horsey matters especially; that's very important. You must be well up, too, in military grades, know about Sandhurst, and so on. Boating is an important topic. (Gissing 1985, p. 249)

It would be easy to assume that the target of Gissing's mockery is the idea that the art of writing is something that can be taught. In a letter to George Bainton, however, written a few years before the appearance of *New Grub Street*, Gissing reflects on the idea that "there are persons extant who undertake to instruct young men in the art of journalistic composition," and claims "[w]ithout irony" his own interest in attending such a lesson to see how it was conducted. "Does the teacher select a leading article from the *Daily Telegraph*," he wonders, and invite the class to ponder "the artifices of style whereby this writer recommends himself to the attention of the public?" (Gissing, cited in Bainton 1890, pp. 83–84). Gissing's tone may be jocular here, but when in the same letter he reflects whether creative writing might be taught in a similar way, he concludes in all apparent seriousness that:

If a man of ripe intelligence could have taken me at the age of twenty, and have read with me suitable portions of Sir Thomas Browne, of Jeremy Taylor, of Milton's prose, of Steele, De Quincey, Landor, Ruskin – to make a rough list of names – that, I think, would have been a special training valuable beyond expression. (ibid.)

What troubles Gissing, then, is not the idea that aspiring writers might be helpfully assisted, through the carefully guided close reading of some classic English prose, "towards an appreciation of style in others, and to some measure of self-criticism" (Gissing, cited in Bainton 1890, p. 84), but rather that they would be encouraged, as *New Grub Street* puts it, to "make a trade of an art." This, according to the novel's Edmund Reardon, is "the unpardonable sin" and a "brutal folly" (Gissing 1985, p. 81) which

not only implies a loss of status for the artist but also a degradation of the art form they practice. The real problem with Whelpdale’s advice to aspiring authors, as Reardon and *New Grub Street* frame it, is not that it is ridiculous per se but that the tastes of the reading public are ridiculous, and that Whelpdale seems to be proposing we allow market forces in an almost literal sense to dictate our fiction.

Reardon himself is described in the novel by the character Jasper Milvain, an ambitious young journalist, as “the old type of unpractical artist” (Gissing 1985, p. 38), one who “might write a fairly good book once every two or three years” but who is unable or refuses to compromise and cater to the market, and who is therefore by no means “the kind of man to keep up literary production as a paying business” (Gissing 1985, p. 36). Milvain refers to himself, in contrast, as “the literary man of 1882”—the year the novel opens—and experiences no qualms in announcing that “Literature nowadays is a trade,” nor in opining that:

Putting aside men of genius, who may succeed by mere cosmic force, your successful man of letters is your successful tradesman. He thinks first and foremost of the markets; when one kind of goods begins to go off slackly, he is ready with something new and appetising. (ibid., p. 38)

Whereas Reardon writes his fiction with no thought of the market and then tries to sell the manuscript “as if he lived in Sam Johnson’s Grub Street,” the modern author, according to Milvain, knows “what literary fare is in demand in every part of the world” (ibid., p. 39), and sets to work to provide whatever the public appetite demands. Such information is in large part what Whelpdale’s lessons and his manual claim to pro Popular demand for the kind of advice he is offering results in the quick sale of “nearly six hundred” copies (ibid., p. 304). Nor is Whelpdale’s book “all rubbish, by any means,” Milvain asserts “In the chapter on writing for magazines, there are one or two very good hints!” (ibid., p. 249).

### CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WRITERS IN A CHANGING LITERARY MARKETPLACE

Although it may surprise today’s reader to learn that Whelpdale’s author’s guide contains a chapter on writing for magazines, this was by no means unusual for the new generation of literary advice handbooks



which began to appear in the final decades of the nineteenth century. In contrast to the relatively specific modes of writing addressed in individual twenty-first-century advice literature, guides of this era tended to discuss novel-writing, short stories, poetry, drama, and also how to write for newspapers and periodicals. Percy Russell's *The Literary Manual; or, A Complete Guide to Authorship* (1886) is divided into two parts, the first dealing with poetry, drama, fiction, creative properties, and the art of fiction, in addition to discussing copyright and suggested reading for aspiring writers. The second part deals at equal length with the history of the newspaper press, the workings of a printing office, the life of a working journalist, ordinary reporting, leader writing, reviewing, how to deal with newspaper proprietors, the libel laws, and how to write for such specialized outlets as the comic and illustrated press, the religious press, and trade journals.<sup>2</sup>

Russell's second such work, *The Author's Manual*, first published in 1890, explicitly subtiles itself *A Complete and Practical Guide to All Branches of Literary Work*, and is divided into two parts of equal length, the first covering "Newspaper and Periodical Literature," and the second "Book Literature" (including two chapters on poetry, one on drama, one on the novel, one on fiction as an art, one on making a name in literature, and one on writing for children). Leopold Wagner's *How to Publish a Book or Article and How to Produce a Play: Advice to Young Authors* (1898), which is divided equally into three parts ("Books," "Periodicals," and "Plays"), notes that "it is in the minor magazines that young writers generally obtain their first footing in literature," and provides separate chapters on writing for each different type of journalistic publication (including newspapers, ladies' magazines, the illustrated monthlies, the old-fashioned monthlies, the comic press, and Christmas specials). It also includes chapters on such practical matters as publications to be avoided, traps for the unwary, acquiring technical knowledge (and a reputation for expertise in a specific area), copyright, and remuneration—not only offering a list of newspapers, journals, and magazines but also discussing the rates of pay for different periodicals and even which day of the week and month contributors should expect to be paid by each (Wagner 1898, pp. 113, 159, 167 ff).

Besant's *The Pen and the Book* seeks to provide its readers "first with a general view of the Literary Life; next, with a chapter on the requirements of each branch and thirdly, with the facts relating to the meaning and value of literary property" (Besant 1899, p. vii). The first section of

the book discusses not only poetry and prose fiction (in a single chapter entitled “The Life of Imagination”) but also a variety of other literary careers, with a chapter each devoted to jobs in publishing, editorship, and the life of a critic and essayist, while the third section of the book devotes another whole chapter to journalism. E. H. Lacon Watson’s *Hints to Young Authors* (1902) offers five chapters of advice on how to build a career in journalism: “How to Handle an Editor,” “Books for Review,” “More about Reviewing,” “The Expert” and “Notes and Leaders”—before it reaches the one chapter it devotes to “Poetry – as a relaxation” and its single chapter of “Notes on Novel Writing.” Arnold Bennett’s *How to Become an Author: A Practical Guide* (1903) includes advice not only on “The Literary Career,” “The Formation of Style,” “The Novel,” “Sensational and Other Serials,” and “Short Stories” but on “Non-Fictional Writing” and “Journalism” as well, noting that although he means to deal chiefly with “the art and craft of fiction,” “he notes that “very many, if not most authors begin by being journalists” (Bennett 1903, p. 10) (see also Atwell 2013, pp. 121–125).

It is Besant who addresses most fully the reasons why this was the case, and why practical information about journalism had come to occupy such a prominent role in author’s guides of this period. “There are at this moment” he comments, “hundreds of papers and journals and magazines, weekly and monthly, published at prices varying from half-a-crown to a penny,” the circulation of some of which is “enormous, far beyond the wildest dreams of twenty years ago” (Besant 1899, p. 30). As Peter Keating points out, “the immediate economic causes of this phase of expansion” were “new technological developments in printing and communication” alongside the “mid-Victorian free-trade legislation which repealed the Advertisement Duty in 1853, Stamp Duty in 1855 and Paper Duty in 1860” (Keating 1991, p. 34). Both these changes allowed much cheaper periodicals to circulate much more widely, freely, and rapidly. Noting another major cultural and socioeconomic change with equally significant literary repercussions during this period, Besant suggests that such periodicals provided “the favourite reading of millions who until the last few years never read anything at all: they are the outcome of the School Board, which pours out every year [...] by the hundred thousand, boys and girls into whom they have instilled [...] a love of reading,” and he further observes that “to provide this literature thousands of pens are at work every day” (Besant 1899, pp. 54, 56). The Elementary Education Act 1870, which laid the foundations of universal

elementary education in England and Wales, had established elected local school boards with the authority to build and manage schools in areas in which there were insufficient places. Further Education Acts between 1870 and 1893 established the principle of compulsory attendance for all children up to a certain age, which had been extended by 1880 to ten years.

In *New Grub Street* to write for this audience, to expend one's energies in "the manufacture of printed stuff which no-one even pretended to be more than a commodity for the day's market" (Gissing 1985, p. 137), is presented as degrading—implicitly or explicitly—even by those who are willing and able to embrace the new economic logic of the changing literary marketplace. Whelpdale, for instance, characterizes the new generation of students being produced by the reinvented school system as "the quarter-educated [...] young men and women who can just read but are incapable of sustained attention" (Gissing 1985, p. 296), while even Milvain feels the need somewhat defensively to assert that "we people of brains are justified in supplying the mob with the food it likes" (Gissing 1985, p. 43). *The Pen and the Book*, in contrast, like other literary handbooks of this period, presents the advent of mass literacy and resulting development of a hugely more varied and wide-reaching print culture as a tremendously positive development for writers. "The critic who speaks with contempt of a penny paper circulating by the hundred thousand," Besant argues, "does not understand that it expresses a certain stage in the growth of the mind" (Besant 1899, pp. 55–6). The implication of this somewhat patronizing way of putting it suggests that these changes will ultimately supplement with new readers the existing literary culture, rather than supplanting it.

Furthermore, thanks to the income possible from a side-career in journalism, claim both Besant and Percy Russell, a trajectory of tragic literary failure like that of Thomas Chatterton—the precocious poet and forger who had poisoned himself in despair at his poverty at the age of seventeen in a garret in Holborn in 1770—is now a thing of the past (see Besant 1899, pp. 23–24; Russell 1886, p. 2). Nor was it only journalism which now claimed a mass readership. "The public in view for the successful writer of fiction is vaster than any novelist of old ever dreamed of," declares Percy Russell (Russell 1886, p. 187). As a result, notes Arnold Bennett, the "rewards of the really successful novelist seems to increase year by year," and he goes on to observe that "By writing nearly a hundred and fifty thousand words a year" the author of best sellers

can expect to “make an annual income of three thousand five hundred pounds” (Bennett 1903, p. 25).

### MEN OF GENIUS, LITERARY VALUE, AND THE BUSINESS SIDE OF BOOKS

It is perhaps telling, however, that several of these literary advice handbooks feel the need, like Milvain, to make an exception of the “man of genius” when discussing the need for aspiring authors to bear in mind, when writing, what Bennett calls “The Business Side of Books” (ibid., p. 169). “I am not writing for the genius,” declares E. H. Lacon Watson, since such an individual is seemingly in no need of the kinds of practical and professional advice Watson provides (Watson 1902, p. 25). “Genius, of course, [...] will surely work out its own way” to success, agrees Percy Russell (1886, p. 86). The issue being glossed over here is what becomes, in a world in which literature is a trade and the successful writer is a canny professional who has familiarized themselves with the demands of the market and set themselves to meet them, of the idea of the heroic man of letters in a Carlylean sense, a “Great Soul,” living apart from the world, “endeavouring to speak forth the inspiration that was in him by Printed Books, and find place and subsistence by what the world would please to give him for doing that” (Carlyle 1980, p. 205).<sup>3</sup>

This version of what a writer might or should be, this model of the relationship between the writer and the world, is one that haunts both *New Grub Street* and the late-Victorian and Edwardian author’s guides under discussion in this chapter. By allowing a loophole in the rules for the occasional individual genius, Milvain pays tribute to the persisting influence and appeal of this archetype, while at the same time refusing to examine the full implications of his suggestion that to achieve success, or rather to avoid failure, it is necessary for the literary aspirant to “think first and foremost of the markets” (Gissing 1985, p. 38). Indeed, it may be no coincidence that *New Grub Street* opens so precisely and emphatically in 1882, the year after Carlyle’s death.

Approaching a similar set of cultural anxieties from a slightly different angle, Walter Besant repeatedly reminds readers of *The Pen and the Book* that we should “keep quite separate and distinct in our minds the literary value of a work and the commercial value of a work,” further explaining “The Literary value you understand without any definition: the commercial value of the book is just measured by the public demand for it

– that and nothing more” (Besant 1899, pp. 3, 5). As Adrian Poole has noted, however, when it suits Besant’s argumentative purposes he is quite prepared to collapse this distinction, prescribing the ultimate decision of value to the reading public and blithely declaring that in the modern Anglophone literary marketplace “good work is instantly recognised, and the only danger is that the universal cry for more may lead to hasty and immature production” (ibid., p. 37, cited in Poole 1975, p. 127). Such a sleight of hand allows Besant to reconcile two contrasting and contradictory versions of what it might mean to be a man of letters.

Not all Besant’s contemporaries felt able to assert such confidence in the taste of the reading public, such faith in the continued survival of a generally agreed, implicit, and unchanging sense of what might constitute good work. What else, after all, are the extensive reading lists which feature so prominently in late-Victorian writing guides except an anxious attempt to ensure the transmission of a shared sense of literary value, at least among practitioners of the art of fiction? In *The Author’s Manual*, Percy Russell emphasizes “the absolute necessity there is for the young writer being well read,” providing a twenty-page reading list in his chapter “On Reading and the Use of Books,” which includes “Recommended general reading” (including works of theology, philosophy, social, architectural, economic, and natural history); “a general foundation in English Literature,” from Old English onward, including novels, poetry, plays, and non-fiction; key works for understanding the history of language, and a course focused on general Continental literature, which takes in “Tourgénieff, Dostoievski and Tolstoi” (Russell, n.d., pp. 221–241). Only through such an ambitious program of autodidacticism, it is suggested (through what Bennett calls the “self-education of the aspirant”) that is it possible to become an author (Bennett 1903, p. 38). Besant himself insists upon the necessity that the aspiring writer “should read and know Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Addison, Fielding, Smollett, Johnson, Cowper, Wordsworth, Keats, Byron, Coleridge, Charles Lamb, Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne, and a great many others, here omitted” (Besant 1899, p. 41).

As we have already seen, when Gissing imagines how creative writing might be taught, his first step is to compile a preliminary list of authors whose work would repay guided close reading, additionally recommending the aspiring writer carry with them everywhere the “a

small volume of selections from [Walter Savage] Landor’s ‘Golden Treasury’ series, and examine closely Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* and *Villette*” (Gissing, cited in Bainton 1890, p. 85). Gissing is unusual among purveyors of literary advice during this period not only in the concern he demonstrates for how the aspiring writer is able to afford all these books, in an era before municipal public libraries and cheap paperbacks (he names a specific affordable edition of Landor) but also in raising the question of what exactly is to be gained by closely studying specific authors and texts in a guided and focused manner. Gissing recommends that aspiring writers read Brontë’s novels, for instance, with particular attention to her skill “in the selection of words and the linking of sentences” (*ibid.*), to be consulted as models of good stylistic practice, and as texts which illustrate deft and inventive ways of engaging with some of the specific technical challenges facing the literary craftsperson. It is often less clear, when it comes to Russell and other author’s guides of the period, whether such reading lists are intended for the same purposes, or whether the recommendations are for the general accumulation of cultural capital. It is also true, of course, that the narrators of the novels of this period generally allude to, and quote directly from other authors and literary texts much more freely and directly than the narrators of most twenty-first-century novels, so there is a sense in which a handy mental catalog of quotation and allusions is part of the professional equipment of an author of the period under discussion.

A further role of such lists, we might suggest, is to emphasize the endurance of great writing, even of works which had not been recognized by the public at the time. Despite all the emphasis such guides place on the importance of understanding the changing marketplace, they are careful to refuse to allow the general mass of readers the final verdict on questions of literary importance. They frequently emphasize that nothing written solely with the marketplace in mind will last, and that aspiring writers should not aim simply to imitate the latest bestseller. “Our taste,” suggests E. H. Lacon Watson, inviting his reader to identify with him as one of the literati, “has been over-educated, over-refined; we pay too much attention to the old models; we lay too much stress on sound and grammatical English, the value of words, and the delicate niceties of style” (Watson 1902, pp. 164–65). Watson further suggests that this results in an inability to appreciate what “the public find to admire in works like [Marie Corelli’s] *The Master Christian* and [Hall Caine’s] *The Eternal City*,” which were best sellers of the early 1900s (*ibid.*). Although Watson

(ironically) concedes the supposed superiority of mass taste to that of the educated individual, he is instructing his reader in all the things to look down upon in the contemporary best seller and to avoid in their own work.

“PREPARE FOR SERIOUS WORK”:  
DILIGENCE, PROFESSIONAL PRACTICALITIES,  
AND THE RULES OF THE “ART OF FICTION”

What other kinds of literary advice do the author’s guides of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offer? The emphasis for the most part is very much on the professional practicalities of literary life: almost all the guides so far mentioned in this chapter contain sections on manuscript presentation, procedures for approaching publishers, the role of the literary agent, and what Bennett calls “matters of practical detail” (Bennett 1903, p. 78).<sup>4</sup> This includes suggestions such as the ideal length of a novel (80,000 words, according to both Watson and Bennett) (Watson 1902, p. 17; Bennett 1903, p. 130), different methods of receiving payment (of which he recommends the royalty system and advises against the risk of self-publication) (Besant 1899, p. 167), the laws surrounding copyright,<sup>5</sup> and the likely scale of remuneration for various kinds of literary projects (see Wagner 1898, p. 35; Watson 1902, p. 104; Russell, n.d., pp. 210–213). Arnold Bennett, drawing on his own experiences as a publisher’s reader, takes the reader of *How to Become an Author* through each step of what happens to a manuscript that has arrived in a publisher’s office, and provides a helpful warning that your manuscript will almost certainly “be refused by the first publisher to whom it is sent” (Bennett 1903, pp. 174, 173–177). Leopold Wagner includes a list of publishers (in 1897) who accept unsolicited manuscripts, as well as a model of the kind of cover letter to attach to one, encouraging brevity in such letters on the basis that, to publishers, longer letters are “more remarkable for verbosity than charm” (Wagner 1898, p. 59).

When it comes to the actual writing of fiction, the suggestions offered in these handbooks fall into two categories: advice on the practicalities of composition, and a discussion of what Walter Besant calls the “general laws” of the “art of fiction” (Besant 1902, p. 6). With regard to productive habits of writing, such guides universally place emphasis on the vital importance of hard work and diligence. “The one paramount

rule,” claims Bennett, is that the writer “must always write his best; he must never leave a sentence until he is convinced he cannot improve it” (Bennett 1903, p. 45). Percy Russell likewise insists that a primary objective of his *Literary Manual* “is to inculcate above all things the unspeakable importance of taking pains, of attending minutely to detail, of investing every piece of literary work with the utmost finish that it is susceptible of receiving, and generally of avoiding all forms of careless, slovenly, or in any sense imperfect work” (Russell 1886, p. 86). On similar grounds, Wagner recommends that aspiring writers first create complete rough drafts of the entire work and then, in a second draft, “set to work on revision and correction” (Wagner 1898, p. 29). Advising aspiring writers, Walter Besant instructs that they should:

Make up your mind that you cannot give to the work too careful preparation: too serious consideration: that you cannot correct your work too jealously: that you must be prepared to write and to rewrite, if necessary, with patience, until you have produced your effect. (Besant 1899, pp. 39–40)

Inviting feedback from others is also recommended before work is submitted to a publisher or agent. Bennett suggests reading all materials aloud to an audience or individual, while Wagner counsels that if a hopeful author wishes to “inflict his MS [manuscript] upon all his acquaintance,” he should “impress upon them the fact that he does not seek their praise, but their candid opinion” (Bennett 1903, p. 45; Wagner 1898, pp. 30–31). Other practical suggestions include carrying of a notebook, which Watson claims is of great use to aspiring authors (Watson 1902, p. 94). Besant, too, insists that one “must carry his notebook always” (Besant 1902, p. 41). When it comes to how much writing they should aim to produce each day, Watson suggests they should aim for between one and two thousand words daily, the surplus allowing for selection, while Wagner advises that it will be profitable to “cultivate the habit of sitting down to write whenever and wherever he has the opportunity” (Watson 1902, p. 121; Wagner 1898, p. 31).

In his lecture “The Art of Fiction”, delivered at the Royal Institution on 25 April 1884 (and later incorporated almost wholesale into *The Pen and the Book*), Walter Besant claims that the novel, much like painting, sculpture, or music, is an art form “governed and directed by general laws; and that these laws may be laid down and taught with as much



precision and exactness as the laws of harmony, perspective and proportion,” and in his lecture, Besant seeks to set out these laws of fiction for his audience (Besant 1902, p. 6). Many of them remain familiar as the very same items of advice given to aspiring writers today: that they should write about what they know from firsthand “personal observation and observation,” and that they should dramatize or show what is happening, rather than just flatly telling it (ibid., p. 34). Besant asserts that in given situations “it should be the first care of the writer to present it as dramatically” as possible (ibid., p. 48). Character should not be conveyed either “by reason of some mannerism of speech or of carriage” or by lengthy description, but rather revealed through “action and dialogue” (ibid., pp. 53–54). Besant also emphasizes the value of style to a work of literary art, which he defines as “careful workmanship,” insisting on the importance of repeated rewriting for producing a finished and effective work of fiction (ibid., pp. 59, 61).

Another point on which Besant and the other literary advice handbooks of this period agreed is the primary importance of story to a novel. “All descriptions which hinder instead of helping the action, all episodes of whatever kind, all conversation which does not either advance the story or illustrate the characters, ought to be rigidly suppressed,” Besant urges (ibid., pp. 47–48). According to Watson, it is therefore vital to plan out the plot carefully right from the start. He explains that “Most novelists of my acquaintance elaborate their plots and even go so far as to summarise each individual chapter, before they begin to write a word, and in the end this saves time and much mental worry” (Watson 1902, p. 118). Bennett advises that spending “A day over the plot before the actual writing had begun [...] may save ten days later on” (Bennett 1903, p. 137). Percy Russell, on similar grounds, dedicates a whole chapter of his *Literary Manual* to plot construction.<sup>6</sup>

These writer’s guides place equal emphasis on the importance of careful plotting in their discussion of other modes of writing. “The art of fiction is the art of telling a story” (ibid., p. 103), insists Bennett in his chapter on short stories, which discusses a variety of possible models and markets for short fiction. In playwriting too, Bennett suggests that “the plot is everything – or nearly so” (ibid., p. 89). Like other author’s guides of the period, Bennett’s discussion of playwriting is very much grounded in the practicalities and restrictions of the stage; he offers “a brief sketch of the conditions of the modern theatre, together with a few hints for the aspiring dramatist” (ibid., p. 209). Leopold Wagner, who discusses

a variety of theatrical forms including burlesques and musicals, as well as “Pantomimes” and “Curtain-Raisers,” offers advice on securing copyright for plays, and notes what is not allowed on stage, even warning that a “bald caricature of a living personage is not permitted in a play” (Wagner 1898, pp. 187–188), and informing the reader that playwriting is “in these days by far the most remunerative form of literary effort” (Wagner 1898, p. 169).

## GENDER, FICTION, AND LITERARY ADVICE

Platitudinous as some of this advice may sound, it is nevertheless reductive of Peter Keating to dismiss so much of it as “little more than belletristic chat” (Keating 1991, p. 71). For one thing, this irons out significant differences of tone and approach between different guides of the era. Arnold Bennett is by far the most prescriptive in his advice. Leopold Wagner frequently bolsters the authority of his own advice by quoting other, more celebrated authors, which is not a need felt by Besant. These texts vary widely in terms of the level of formality with which they address the reader, ranging from the jovial playfulness of Wagner, who wryly recommends in his discussion of how to choose a publisher that “sexual” fiction should not be sent to the S.P.C.K. (Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge) (Wagner 1898, p. 52), to the brisk practicality of Watson, to Percy Russell’s relative formality. Nor are the least formal of these texts necessarily those with the least helpful practical information to impart.

Not only are the writing guides of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries valuable as historical documents, recording a pivotal moment in the development of writing as a profession, exposing usually unexamined assumptions about fiction and its purposes commonly shared by readers and authors in this period, but they are also, as I hope this chapter has suggested, literary documents, pieces of writing in themselves worthy of close critical attention in their own right. Who, for instance, is the imagined reader of each of these texts? How are they constructed and positioned?

One of the striking differences between Whelpdale’s creative writing advice in *New Grub Street* and the advice offered in almost all the real-life guides is that Gissing’s fictional “dealer in literary advice” consciously targets aspiring female writers. He reacts with “delight” when he hears that Jasper Milvain’s sister Dora has read his literary handbook, and he

has plans for the lessons at his proposed creative writing school to be taught by a woman precisely because aspiring female students who wish to learn to write will “prefer coming to a woman” (Gissing 1985, p. 249). That the addressee of so many of these real-life guides is assumed to be male, Bennett being an honorable exception in this regard, is not simply a matter of pronoun convention, but another instance of the ways in which such guides attempt to frame and make manageable unsettling changes both in the literary marketplace and the idea of the writer, endeavoring to offer at times a consoling sense of continuity in terms of gendered norms even as they are themselves both symptoms and agents of such change.

For Cosima Chudleigh, the young female writer who is the protagonist of the 1898 novel *A Writer of Books* by George Paston (Emily Morse Symonds), the “one immense disqualification for her chosen profession” which she experiences as a woman is her relative “lack of experience and knowledge of the world” (Paston 1898, p. 42).<sup>7</sup> As she writes she finds herself haunted and depressed by “[t]houghts of Balzac, Flaubert, the De Goncourts, the Daudets,” men who “have drunk deep of the cup of life, and write of what they did know,” whereas she, “a girl, bred in a library, had gained all her knowledge at second hand” (ibid.). Not only are the literary figures named all men, however, but they are also all authors of celebrated novels or memoirs of literary life, including texts like Balzac’s *Illusions Perdues*, Flaubert’s *L’Education sentimentale*, the diaries of the de Goncourts, and Daudet’s *Trente ans de Paris* (much admired by Gissing), which for a generation or more of aspiring writers in the era preceding the literary handbooks which have been discussed in this chapter, had provided or seemed to provide not only a rare insider’s glimpse into the workings of the book world, but also (at least for male readers) a pattern on which one might attempt to model one’s own literary career.

It is as a supplement and corrective to such male-focused narratives that *A Writer of Books* positions itself: as well as all the other challenges facing a young novelist who is trying to find a publisher for their work, Cosima also has to deal with the unwelcome attentions of a lecherous literary critic, and (in the latter part of the novel) with a husband who refuses to take seriously the idea of a professional female writer. It is furthermore striking that *A Writer of Books* is not only a novel about writers, but a novel that itself contains a great deal of practical writing advice. Indeed, one long discussion in which Miss Nevill, an acquaintance of Cosima’s,

gives advice on how to make a living in journalism, would fit seamlessly into almost any of the writing guides which have been discussed in this chapter (*ibid.*, pp. 35–36).

In opening my discussion with a fictional example of an author’s guide and closing it with a glance at a novel in which the boundary between the novel of literary life and a literary advice handbook seems to blur, I have hoped (as well as giving a sense of the kinds of practical advice that were being offered to aspiring authors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) to provide a sense of the ways in which fiction and non-fictional accounts of the changing literary marketplace in this period inform, complement, complicate, interrogate, and debate each other. These illuminate each other not only in what they take for granted about the rules and purpose of fiction and what authorship means in the context of the contemporary marketplace, but also in what suddenly seems to be uncertain and attainable, a world of fresh anxieties and new possibilities in the process of being born which is recognizably the literary and commercial landscape we still inhabit.

## NOTES

1. See also Atwell (2013, pp. 111–3) and Collins (2016, pp. 136–9).
2. For more on Russell see Keating (1968, p. 71), Atwell (2013, p. 115), and Collins, (2016, pp. 126–129).
3. Adrian Poole discusses the impact of Carlyle and of Carlylean attitudes towards the figure of the man of letters on Gissing in his *Gissing in Context* (1975, pp. 105–108).
4. Bainton’s *The Art of Authorship* is the exception here.
5. *The Pen and the Book* includes a chapter on this topic contributed by G. H. Thring, Secretary of the Society of Authors.
6. This is discussed (very critically) in Collins (2016, p. 129).
7. See Keating (1991, pp. 85–6), for a differently-inflected reading of this novel.

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## “Do You Use a Pencil or a Pen?”: Author Interviews as Literary Advice

*Rebecca Roach*

### INTRODUCTION

Author interviews have been a successful vehicle for conveying literary advice in large part because this is not commonly considered to be their sole purpose. Examining this contradiction and the peculiar, and shifting nature of the relationship between author interviews and the advice genre across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries forms the basis of this chapter.

In his 2007 introduction to *The Paris Review Interviews* vol. 2, author Orhan Pamuk speaks fondly of reading William Faulkner’s proclamation, in his 1956 *Paris Review* interview, that “(t)he writer’s only responsibility is to his art.” For Pamuk, it was “consoling to read these words in a country where the demands of the community came before all else” (Pamuk 2007, p. viii). Here, and in his 2005 *Paris Review* interview, Pamuk foregrounds a particular model of authorial subjectivity. Against the version of Turkish literary culture which he constructs, Pamuk imagines authorial subjectivity as bound up with an international community

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of like-minded readers. In so doing Pamuk indicates one of the major features of the author interview seen from the perspective of literary advice: they model authorial subjectivity both for authors and for readers. For an aspiring writer, author interviews can offer enculturation into a community and identity; in this regard they are a major source of literary advice today. Knowing that Toni Morrison writes her drafts with number two blue pencils probably will not help someone to author the next *Beloved*, but reading these interviews can prove a valuable source of tips, cultural norms, and insights into the life of professional writing (Pamuk 2007, p. viii).

Despite such usage, the purpose of an interview with an author is rarely conceived (by critics at least) to be the provision of literary advice. More commonly, author interviews are considered by literary scholars and the publishing industry at large as a means of publicizing individual writers, acquiring audiences, and promoting specific titles. Indeed, since their inauguration in the late nineteenth century, they have been regularly castigated as the quintessential example of celebrity self-publicizing and fake news, or what in the 1960s, sociologist Daniel Boorstin would call the “pseudo-event” (Boorstin 1961, p. 11). J. M. Coetzee is not alone in having claimed (in an interview) that “[t]he literary interview has been taken over by the publishing industry as a way of marketing books, or more accurately, of marketing the author as an interesting and engaging personality” (Rainey et al. 2011, p. 852). Certainly, author interviews, be they print, platform, or podcast, are regularly deployed as part of a publisher’s media campaign. Yet, they also appear, with remarkable persistence, in a much wider context: in newspapers, literary magazines, professional newsletters, and academic journals, as well as across broadcast and social media today. Their popularity with diverse groups of publishers and readers is far beyond that of the usual advertisement. Such popularity also hints at why the format has been a successful vehicle for conveying literary advice.

The author interview is a flexible format, able to accommodate a number of different (sometimes competing) goals and reading practices, which includes providing literary advice. In our broader culture, interviews represent something of the contradiction of identity in modernity: they are used to capture the individuality of an (author) subject, while also being deployed as a means of analyzing and categorizing large populations (Roach 2018). This contradiction leaves open the question of whether an author interview should be approached for the purpose of



emulation, pleasure, or edification, and what kind of knowledge it might confer. Furthermore, it brings into question the author's own expertise. A 2006 interview with Monica Ali in the London *Telegraph*, for example, might be read for numerous reasons: insight into the genesis of *Brick Lane*; the pleasure of Ali's anecdotes; or to harvest tips from a practitioner (Brown 2006). The motivations and rewards of reading author interviews are heterogeneous (as are authors' motivations for conducting them) and as such we do not conceive of the reading experience as instrumental. While author interviews may contain advice, they are not solely, or even primarily, reducible to this end.

Despite this important caveat, author interviews have proven popular with aspiring writer-readers, as editors, authors, and interviewers have long recognized. This is in large part thanks to their ability to constitute specific publics. Purportedly a face-to-face conversation for the benefit of an absent public, in the interview encounter the interviewer acts as a proxy, mediating between the interviewee and a geographically and temporally dispersed community of readers. The questions the interviewer asks, the scenarios they depict, and the assumptions they make about reader knowledge and interests help to bring that public into being.<sup>1</sup> When the interviewer (famously) asks whether a writer uses a pencil or a pen, they are assuming that the reader will have an interest in the answer. Although the stakes might not be explicit (and indeed different readerships overlap), there is a general assumption that the writer has knowledge, and therefore advice, to impart for that readership. Author interviews can help to constitute publics that are oriented toward issues surrounding the writing craft and literature's position in the wider culture; in doing so they can help to enculture novice writer-readers into such communities.

More particularly, the author interview offers a model of authorial subjectivity for the reader. Yet, this modeling is contradictory. Often taking place in the author's study, the interview positions itself as a stimulating conversation and the author as existing outside of the pressures of the marketplace, while simultaneously commoditizing that private persona and discussion for a mass audience. Frequently endorsing a Romantic conception of authorship as spontaneous, individualistic, oracular self-expression, interviews also mediate a conception of authorship in modernity that is highly standardized, via a collaborative process wherein the interviewer's labor is often devalued. Structurally, interviews therefore highlight many of the tensions inherent within our modern understanding

of the author and the craft of writing. For aspiring writers, the elaboration of such tensions can prove illuminating. Even those author interviews which do not explicitly discuss technique or training can inadvertently convey, thanks to their peculiar format, literary advice in the form of edification about writing cultures and identities.

Popular with a mass readership (which is not limited to aspiring writers), author interviews have also taken on a structural role within the academy. In reflecting on issues concerning production, interpretation, influence, and methodologies, author interviews have offered an important venue for exploring questions that have often been ignored by Anglo-American English departments since the mid-twentieth century. As Tim Mayers has argued, the “craft criticism” championed in creative writing journals, workshops, and author interviews emerged in the years in which the professionalization of literary studies and New Critical platforms of aesthetic autonomy disenfranchised both authors and untrained readers from the act of criticism (Mayers 2005, pp. 34, 44).<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the academy, such venues positioned the author, rather than the critic, as an expert and offered an outlet for the concerns and interests surrounding the craft of writing. As we shall see, the popularity of those interviews produced under the remit of “craft criticism” would eventually contribute to the emergent prestige of the author interview within the academy itself. Such author interviews thus contain another inadvertent form of literary advice: revealing to scholars the overlaps and distances between critical and craft reading practices since the mid-century.

In what follows, I single out two transatlantic interview series with writers for close attention, before turning to discuss the contemporary use of author interviews for the purposes of literary advice. The first series, “How Writers Work,” was conducted by American journalist Louise Morgan and published in the British weekly *Everyman* in the early 1930s. Although not the first such series, “How Writers Work” offers an important early example of author interviews being positioned quite explicitly as a means of imparting technical literary advice to readers. The second case study is *The Paris Review*’s long-running “Art of Fiction” interview series, launched in 1953 and still garnering a strong readership today. Ostensibly quite similar to Morgan’s interviews in format, comparing the reception of these series is suggestive as we think about the shifting relationship between author interviews and literary advice in the context of broad transformations in publishing and higher education in the second

half of the twentieth century. I end by briefly considering the contemporary popularity of author interviews in the literary advice industry as manifested in a digital context.

### “HOW WRITERS WORK”: LITERARY ADVICE IN THE AUTHOR INTERVIEW

From the late nineteenth century onward in Britain and America, author interviews emerged as a regular feature in newspapers, periodicals, and collected anthologies for the general reading public. Although rarely conceived explicitly in terms of advice culture, this trend would have broader consequences for the print media industries. Increasingly, review publications, often aimed at the publishing and journalism professions, would debate the implications of interviewing for the trade. Articles such as “On Not Interviewing Shaw” (Rice 1923) and “The Confessions of a Dime-Novelist: An Interview” (Burgess 1902) were a common occurrence in publications such as *The Bookman* (NY), providing an opportunity for general and trade readers to follow and engage in debates about the writing profession. So too as women gained increasing access to the professions in this era, interviews with female journalists, and even interviewees, were used as a means of promoting these newfound economic opportunities to an increasingly educated, ambitious, and independent readership.<sup>3</sup> While not necessarily conceived as offering literary advice, interviews with writers offered an increasingly important space in which the profession and craft of writing could be debated. As the publishing industry and its readerships expanded in the early twentieth century, new venues for what would later become “craft criticism” and also for what we might call “trade chat” or “shop talk” (conversation concerning the publishing industry) would find an audience.

One venue where such nascent craft criticism and trade chat was embraced was in the aforementioned interview series “How Writers Work” which ran in the British weekly *Everyman* in the early 1930s.<sup>4</sup> An important example of author interviews framed as offering potential advice to aspiring writers, “How Writers Work” promised to “reveal for readers [...] the technique, the hours of working, the relaxations and other aspects of the problem of the writer and his craft in relation to his daily life” (Morgan 1930b, p. 739). Positioning writing as a practical activity, the series asked authors to explain details of their working life. Crucially, this approach produced interviews that appealed to a number of

different, often overlapping, readerships with varying motivations, among which could be a desire for literary advice.

The two-penny magazine in which the interview series appeared was aimed at a heterogeneous reading public and had a middlebrow orientation. Discussion of contemporary trends in European and American literature and thought proliferated in *Everyman*, and articles on individuals such as Virginia Woolf, Sergei Eisenstein, and Rainer Maria Rilke presumed a shared belief in the aesthetic value of the arts. However, the magazine also presented contemporary literary knowledge as cultural capital, and writing as a career by which the reader could potentially improve his or her material circumstances. Advertisements for journalism school and correspondence courses, for self-help books, dictionaries, and manuscript preparation services complemented editorial pieces such as tips for the writer on escaping class barriers or “How to Form a Library.” *Everyman* presented a diverse conception of literature’s value and purpose within its pages. This heterogeneity would be well-served by the interview series. Aware that a portion of its readership aspired to literary production, *Everyman* could frame “How Writers Write” as a unique source of information and advice for such readers, without alienating alternative readings.

The interview series included a diverse array of (mainly British) subjects, which included a number of contemporary poets, playwrights, novelists, reviewers, and short-story writers. Some names, such as Marjorie Bowen, Aldous Huxley, Sinclair Lewis, Somerset Maugham, Compton Mackenzie, A. A. Milne, W. B. Yeats, Rose Macaulay, Dorothy Richardson, Henry Handel Richardson, and Rebecca West, are still familiar, while others, such as Clemence Dane, Warrick Deeping, Naomi Royde-Smith, and Anne Douglas Sedgwick, are less so. A few subjects, known mainly for their success in fields other than literature, such as Bertrand Russell, Havelock Ellis, and Humbert Wolfe, also appeared to discuss their (often non-fictional) writing. Such catholicity in subject would help to promote an expansive understanding of the writing craft and its products within the magazine. For a reader interested in garnering literary advice, “How Writers Work” offered breadth of coverage.

The interview format was very consistent, consisting of: a colorful headline; a body of text which intermingled questions and answers with descriptive prose; one or more photographs (often of the writer in a domestic setting such as the garden or hard at work in the study); and an extract from a manuscript page reproduced by facsimile. The latter

two elements, familiar from interview series of the 1890s, were likely designed to appeal to general readers interested in accessing “behind-the-scenes” details of authors’ lives. The supposedly private author’s study has in fact become one of the most commoditized sites of the writing life in the twentieth century, to the extent that the interviews that made them popular are often dispensable today, as in *The Guardian*’s popular “Writers’ Room” series, or *The Paris Review*’s tongue-in-cheek offering of “The Writer’s Fridge” (Crosley 2018).<sup>5</sup> In “How Writers Work” interviewees are regularly depicted poised over manuscripts at their desk, as if caught in the moment of creative inspiration. The manuscript page meanwhile represents both the valuable literary artifact and the labor of writing, the time and effort wrapped up in revisions and the body that produces such carefully penned or typed words. Appealing to general readers, these two elements also support reading for literary advice. By positioning writing as an embodied activity conducted across time and in physical spaces, the series helps to remind readers that published writing is the product of an individual’s labor, a labor that they therefore could hope to emulate.

The topics of conversation further support such readings, offering a wealth of information for an aspiring author. Across “How Writers Work” subjects are asked extensively about their work habits, including methods for avoiding distraction, number of words produced a day, use of writing technologies, willingness to discuss work in progress, regularity of hours, revision practices, source and development of ideas, and reading habits. We learn that A. E. Coppard began writing “[o]ut of sheer envy and emulation”, that Anthony Hope published his first novel at his own expense, and that Dorothy Richardson writes after tea (Morgan 1931b, p. 793; c, p. 9; d, p. 396). More specific topics of conversation are also taken up in individual interviews. When Vita Sackville-West is interviewed, the main thrust of the article is upon the “handicapped” nature of a female writer’s position (Morgan 1930d, p. 391); in the case of Aldous Huxley, it is the effect of his visual disability on his writing practice (Morgan 1930a). The aspiring writer can find in these interviews habits to emulate, as well as reassurance, a sense of identification, and a sense of community.

Indeed, professional and educational experiences are discussed in detail in the series, offering important information about career trajectories. This includes the effect of being published as a “young writer,” pursuing writing in tandem with other careers, the influence of other writers,

and interactions with the publishing industry. Additionally, the perceived professionalization of the author in the contemporary moment is a major topic of conversation, begging the question of whether the writer is a businessman or a creative artist. In the age of Taylorism, should the study be considered the last refuge from standardization, or should the writer embrace the efficiency movement in their working day? The series takes a notably holistic approach, refusing to separate work and relaxation activities, while also acknowledging the pressures of the marketplace. Outlining the major debates of the day around the status of the writer and pursuing expansive, but detailed, conversation about writing, the series offers a means by which readers can familiarize themselves with the culture.

The advisory nature of the interviews was supported by the figure of the interviewer promoted by the series. Louise Morgan was the sole interviewer for the series and acting editor of *Everyman*. She was an American *émigrée*, journalist, editor, and agent with close ties to the Bloomsbury group and the contemporary publishing scene. Notably, she was also a trained academic with an MA from Brown, a doctorate from Bryn Mawr in English, and a number of years of teaching experience in the American higher education system. Her approach to interviewing reflected her pedagogical training as much as it did her interest in contemporary writing: many of her questions are designed to elicit critical reflections on the state of modern literature and on the nature of literary activity itself. Morgan's interviewing style encouraged readers to seek edification in these interviews, whether on the topic of craft or the new mode of criticism.

Throughout these interviews, Morgan is a guiding figure for her engaged, if inexperienced, readers. If her relationship with her subject is that of welcomed guest—Rebecca West speaks of the desire to “visit and interview all at the same time” (Morgan 1931e, p. 460)—for her readers Morgan acts as interpreter and reviewer, providing context to subjects' comments or analyzing the significance of a work as part of a wider trend. Rarely emphasizing her own expertise in writing or pedagogy, Morgan instead often draws on reader expectations about authorship to begin each profile. Thus, an interview with Phoebe Fenwick Gaye begins with the acknowledgment that a “myth still persists among us that authors are not like normal people” and A. A. Milne's interview commences with the remark that it is “usually impossible to predict immortality for a contemporary writer” (Morgan 1930c, p. 777; 1931a, p. 762). Such statements function as hypotheses to explore and test in what follows,

evoking pedagogical methods more familiar from the classroom, workshop, or the critical essay. In "How Writers Write" Morgan provides detailed information about contemporary writers and the craft of writing, while encouraging her readers to treat these interviews as sources of edification. Although the series does not assume that all readers are looking to embark on a writing career, it does consciously present these interviews within a wider self-education framework: author interviews might well help in the aspiring writer's goal of enculturation.

In 1931 (shortly before *Everyman* folded) "How Writers Work" would be transformed into an anthology, *Writers at Work*. Published by Chatto & Windus in a series on contemporary writers, the volume is more subdued in tone and interviewees are clearly included with an eye to posterity: subjects include W. B. Yeats, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Sinclair Lewis, and Somerset Maugham. Meanwhile the introduction would announce the interviews as having been instigated "with the object of discovering [authors'] methods of work and possibly some clue, however remote, to the nature of inspiration." Guided by "one or two vague theories for which [she] hoped to find some basis" (Morgan 1931f, p. vii), Morgan is here the academic researcher striving to interpret and define the author and writing process. Here, along with the instrumentalizing headlines, photos, and facsimiles, the premise that author interviews can offer literary advice has been largely stripped away. In advertisements for the volume, it is promoted as a "study of methods," "sketches," a "proper book to be read by those who are interested in the aims of modern writers," and a book for critics of contemporary literature rather than aspiring writers ("Chatto & Windus [Ad 1]" 1931, p. 703; "Chatto & Windus [Ad 2]" 1931, p. 716; "Chatto & Windus [Ad 3]" 1931, p. 769). So too in reviews, the book's audience was generally conceived to be comprised of those interested in criticism (E. W. 1932, p. 237; "Shorter Notices" 1931, p. 404). In the interviews' re-framing as an anthology, their potential to offer literary advice would be obscured.

*Writers at Work* would not gain a substantial audience either for the publication or in the years since; despite bringing together many of the features that would characterize the modern author interview series for the first time, "How Writers Write" has experienced a similar fate. By contrast, a series of author interviews with a very similar format, having commenced less than a generation later, has grown from strength to strength. *The Paris Review* has published more than three hundred interviews and at least twenty anthologies to date. The explanation for these

different fates is due in part to the series' orientation toward the literary advice industry and the rapid expansion of English Studies in universities.

### PRESTIGE AND PENCILS: *THE PARIS REVIEW* INTERVIEW

Today *The Paris Review's* interview series with authors is extensive and prestigious: six decades of interviews with a range of transatlantic and increasingly international writers including James Baldwin, Marilynne Robinson, William Gibson, Italo Calvino, and Claudia Rankine. In 2006, editor Philip Gourevitch could, with only a smidgen of hubris, make the claim that “a *Paris Review* interview has become a sort of international laurel for writers, a recognition of a mature life's work” (Gourevitch 2006, p. xi). In contrast to the contemporary, journalistic bent of “How Writers Work,” *The Paris Review's* “Art of Fiction” series is firmly oriented toward the future: interviews are “constructed to stand as testimonials for the ages” (ibid., p. ix). Yet, contrary to what we might expect, by positioning the interviews thus the journal has contributed toward their uptake as advice literature.

Having included author interviews in its pages since its inaugural issue, *The Paris Review's* “The Art of Fiction” interview was established early and resembled “How Writers Work” in significant ways. A sketch, later a photograph, of the author accompanied the interview and a facsimile of a manuscript page was regularly included. Unlike in the majority of *Everyman* interviews, here the piece was set out as a Q&A and accompanying narrative by the interviewer(s) restricted to the introductory paragraph. More significantly, editing practices between the two series differed dramatically: while Morgan had authors approve her final interview draft, in *The Paris Review* version long-time editor George Plimpton encouraged the author to collaborate in inserting, rearranging, and entirely rewriting sections of a transcript often produced over several sittings in order to produce the testimonial. Precisely thanks to this lengthy editing process, these interviews have often been conceived by readers as the authorized statements and self-portraits of these writers, therefore less ad hoc and more finessed. Of William Faulkner's 1956 interview, Usha Wilbers notes “[t]he fact that Faulkner had decided to speak out about his work was almost world news” (Wilbers 2008, p. 206), and that the pronouncements made within the piece have been considered vital critical material by Faulkner scholars (ibid., pp. 206–208). Despite very similar formats, their divergent editorial conception and practices



would lead Morgan's efforts to be buried under the detritus of periodical publishing whereas the "Art of Fiction" interviews would be received within the literary community, and eventually the academy, as documents of note.

The subject matter of the later series evokes "How Writers Write," as the "Art of Fiction" similarly focuses on work habits and reading practices. The series is known for its seemingly modest, even petty questions that focus on practical details, for example the now (in)famous, "do you use a pencil or a pen?" Yet, as interviewers and editors associated with the series have pointed out, such questions often generate wider reflection on perceptions of creativity, on style, and on the nature of art. Asked about his use of (quadrille) notebooks, Paul Auster talks at length about frames in fiction and their effects on the reader (Auster 2003). More poignantly, William Carlos Williams's willingness to use a "tape recorder or a dictaphone" attests to the poet's failing sight and the visual import of the word on the page (Williams 1964). Such questions recall many of the same topics of conversation as make up "How Writers Write," although the tone is very different.

This difference is principally the result of the very hierarchical notion of writing that *The Paris Review* interview exemplifies, in contrast to that of *Everyman*. The earlier series includes a heterogeneous conception of authorial labor, where journalists, reviewers, and editors were profiled, alongside poets and novelists, and promoted a professional equivalence between Morgan the interviewing journalist, and her subjects. By contrast, *The Paris Review* interview's emphasis on the subject's prestige has often worked to devalue the labor of the editor, and particularly that of the interviewer. This tone has shifted, however, over the years, as the "Art of Fiction" series expanded to include the Art of Theatre, Editing, Translation, Nonfiction and Comics, among others. While the author-subject is often a wizened "grand master," the interviewers are, especially in the early years, young and inexperienced: "kittens" to the "tomcat" as Malcolm Cowley would put it (Cowley 1976, p. 6). Far from professional journalists, at the beginning the interviewers were often exactly the aspiring writer-readers for whom they were acting as proxy. They tended to ask questions that focused explicitly on the authors' early experiences such as Dorothy Parker's first job at *Vogue*, or Gore Vidal's childhood novel-writing. Subjects are asked to share advice they might have accumulated from a lifetime of writing: Ernest Hemingway, for example, was questioned about the "best intellectual training for the would-be

writer,” the dangers of teaching positions, and the usefulness of journalistic instruction (Hemingway 1958). While *Everyman* and *Paris Review* interviews sought similar information, their construction of the role of the interviewer is very different. Here the interviewer is not that of Morgan’s guide or teacher, equal to the author in status and familiar with the professional norms of the publishing industry, but a novice and fellow applicant.

Following Tim Mayers, we can see this move as an attempt to reclaim the authority of the writer and the discussion of craft in an era of New Criticism and the establishment of Creative Writing as a sub-discipline of the English Department. When Morgan’s series was published, practical criticism was only just beginning to emerge in the English department, and higher education was yet to experience its post-war boom. Fast-forward to 1953 and the conception of the “Art of Fiction” series by a group of young, generally well-educated, expatriates in Paris, in response to the newfound authority of the literary critic back home: the inaugural issue began with a letter to the editor dismissing the contemporary “Age of Criticism,” and the “weight of learned chatter” under which literature groaned (Styron 1953, p. 10). The interview series was an attempt to “resurrect” the author, who was increasingly being subsumed within the academy, by devaluing the mediating roles of interviewer, editor, and critic.<sup>6</sup> In *The Paris Review*, the invisibility of the interviewer and editor works to privilege the authority of the author-subject. In so doing, the “Art of Fiction” constructs a much more limited conception of writing than its 1930s predecessor.

Despite its less than egalitarian notion of authorship, *The Paris Review*’s version has proven popular, especially with writers. Pamuk is not the only writer to have fondly recalled the role these interviews have played across his career. Salman Rushdie talks of being spurred on by reading interviews with John Gardner and Donald Barthelme before and after publishing *Midnight’s Children* (Rushdie 2009, p. x). Margaret Atwood speaks of the “tips and helpful hints” they offer about the writing craft, while noting that “these interviews are a great encouragement to other writers, especially at moments of wavering faith... *I am not the only one who has viewed the page with loathing*” (Atwood 2008, p. ix). Prioritizing the individual subject, the series has privileged solo creative writing over other writing practices, yet it has conceived of itself as offering community, counseling, and support to established writers. In doing so, the interviews are framed as having aspirational value, as well as providing

enculturation. The interview functions both as a badge of international literary merit for the subject, and thus an accolade for others to yearn for, and as a platform where, by consulting these interviews, an aspiring writer becomes part of a reading community which includes other notable authors.

This is an effect and message that the magazine is keen to promote: Pamuk's, Rushdie's, and Atwood's nostalgic comments all come from introductions to volumes of reprinted interviews. *The Paris Review* has been extremely successful at self-mythologizing, and the anthologies, also entitled *Writers at Work*, have helped to cement the reputation of the interview series within literary studies, while changing the status of such interviews to draw them closer to compendiums of advice. Unlike Morgan's effort, the interview format remains little altered in the move from magazine to book, with even manuscript pages and photographs reprinted in later volumes. Also, unlike Morgan, the anthologies have been extremely popular with reviewers, critics, and readers alike. By reprinting interviews *The Paris Review* has helped to ensure a wider audience for their content, both within the critical community that it once eschewed, and with general readers and MFA communities. Topic-based volumes such as *Women Writers at Work*, *Beat Writers at Work*, *Playwrights at Work*, and *Latin American Writers at Work* have identified specific readerships to notable success, while the "Art of Fiction" itself has become a model for the many other interview series which have blossomed in literary and critical journals and anthologies since the late 1970s.<sup>7</sup> While *The Paris Review* might have conceived of itself in opposition to criticism, over the years its interview series has brought it significant critical and literary prestige and popular success.

Such a union has proven additionally useful in an era in which, according to James F. English, "winning a prize is the only truly newsworthy thing a cultural worker can do" (English 2005, p. 21). *The Paris Review*, largely insulated from attacks from the literary-critical community thanks to goodwill it has garnered over the years, has been able to adopt more explicit marketing of its interviews within an advice bracket. Within what Jim Collins sees as the popularization of literary culture today, *The Paris Review* has positioned itself as a source of "literary connoisseurship" for a mass audience, presenting a third option to the alternative authorities of "official literary culture (awards and reviews) or word of mouth" (Collins 2010, pp. 80, 82). Within a broader "taste vacuum," *The Paris Review* interview offers the mode of word-of-mouth communication with

the subject of official literary culture, in a format conventionally associated with pleasurable, rather than academic reading. In 1989 (new edition 1999) Plimpton would edit *The Writer's Chapbook: A Compendium of Fact, Opinion, Wit, and Advice from the Twentieth Century's Preeminent Writers*. Culled from *The Paris Review* interviews, the volume explicitly presents itself as, among other things, advice literature. *The Writer's Chapbook* is divided into sections including "On Reading," "On Work Habits," as well as "On Plot," and provides material that addresses writers' engagement in teaching and conference attendance (Plimpton 1989). In 2018 another book, *The Writer's Chapbook: A Compendium of Fact, Opinion, Wit, and Advice from The Paris Review Interviews*, made its appearance, offered for sale on the website and as a subscriber gift. With their heterogeneous offering of entertainment and edification, the volumes provide an example of the way in which *The Paris Review* has positioned itself, via its curated interview series, as both a provider of professional advice and literary taste for readers, echoing the former (if unrealized) goals of *Everyman*.

As framed by *The Paris Review*, the "Art of Fiction" series constitutes a public of readers joined less by professional expertise than by an affective commitment to the value of creative writing. Reading "How Writers Write" against the "Art of Fiction," the former comes off as much more concerned with providing insight into the practicalities of the contemporary publishing industry and writing life, while the latter engages in longer-term questions of reputation and taste. This division emerges despite the two series often posing identical questions, even of the same subjects: Rebecca West for example was interviewed for both publications. The success of *The Paris Review* series is indicative less of a rejection of the literary advice genre, than of its ability to harness that genre for prestige purposes in an era in which literary advice had (paradoxically) been rejected by the academy.

## AUTHOR INTERVIEWS AND ONLINE LITERARY ADVICE

In the twenty-first century, digital technologies are disrupting and realigning older models of literary prestige, with notable implications for the historical alignment of author interviews and literary advice. Social and web-based media have transformed the ways in which readers and writers can communicate with each other and among themselves. Websites such as Wattpad offer writers online platforms wherein they can seek and

offer advice, feedback, support, and a practice-oriented community; similarly, Goodreads and Amazon reviews offer means by which readers can obtain reading recommendations and reviews distinct from those of the traditional literary gatekeepers. Such platforms and communities have their parallels in an offline environment, such as the Oprah book club or the creative writing group Web 2.0, which have supported their multiplication, diversification, and the creation of virtual interest-oriented audiences. While not necessarily the egalitarian communities envisioned by early proponents (platform affordances certainly shape behaviors), such platforms can bypass and supplant traditional literary mediators such as the interviewer: why read an author interview if you can pose your question directly to the author on Twitter, comment on their blog, up-vote crowd-sourced questions on a Reddit “Ask Me Anything” (AMA), or watch a live-streamed interview on Facebook?

In fact, author interviews have proliferated in the digital environment. Traditional or “Old Media” publications such as *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, or *The Paris Review* now regularly publish their print author interviews on their websites. Publishers such as Penguin and Granta upload print and video interviews as part of a virtual book tour for the launch of an author’s new work. In addition, author interviews often appear in online-only venues such as *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, on literary blogs, and via the social media platforms mentioned above. Conceiving of their readers as similarly varied in motive and habit, such interviews rarely frame themselves explicitly as offering purely literary advice. Stephen King’s 2013 Reddit AMA, for example, not only includes reader questions that ask specifically for literary advice (on dealing with rejection from the publishing industry or writer’s block, for example) but also features questions about his favorite novel, opinions on film adaptations, plans for sequels, or the “creepiest thing” about Maine (Katarokkar 2013). In the AMA King is asked questions also posed in his earlier *Paris Review* interview (his opinion of Kubrick’s adaptation of *The Shining*, for instance) and queried for comments on earlier statements he made in *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (2000). While the communicative technologies may have changed, the heterogeneity of readers’ interests in online and offline author interviews remains the same.

Nevertheless, the author interview has also been deployed more consciously as advice literature in an online setting. Given its prestige, it is unsurprising that *The Paris Review* has become a significant player in the online circulation of literary advice via use of its interview archives.

First made available online in 2010, the interviews were publicized as “the DNA of Literature.” Whether or not they contained the code to literary creation, the interviews offered a free and accessible source of material for readers and researchers for nearly a decade, with the result that they are now widely quoted, excerpted, and cited online. They are also a common source on Wikipedia entries and in author profiles appearing on other mainstream websites. *The Paris Review* regularly quotes from its interview archives on its Twitter feed, and extracts also litter the literary internet world in the form of listicles, review articles, blog posts, and comments in writers’ chat rooms. *Lit Hub*, for example, regularly mines the series archive to publish click-bait advice articles such as “Should You Write What You Know?? 31 Authors Weigh In” or “William H. Gass’s Advice for Writers: ‘You Have to be Grimly Determined’ 1924–2017” (Temple 2017, 2018).

The number of such articles, while partly resulting from pressures to produce low-cost content, testifies to the wider popularization of literary culture and attendant appeal of the writing lifestyle in an era which continues earlier trends toward “bibliotherapy” and literary self-help (Breger 2014). Their quantity, however, is also indicative of an environment wherein the valence of literary advice is seen to have broadened. Various structural factors can be identified, including the emergence of consumer-produced web content (“prosumption”), the massive expansion of online publication venues, and a need for authors to stand out from the crowd. Furthermore, as Sarah Brouillette points out, contemporary policy rhetoric’s model of the “creative worker” dovetails usefully with the goals of neo-liberal capital (Brouillette 2014, pp. 1–16). The author interview, as we have seen, offers a document that disrupts instrumental understandings of reading practices, and champions a model of autonomous authorship that downplays others’ labor (and rarely pays the author-subject). From this angle, the advice that online author interviews implicitly model might be productively challenged.

Notably, it is in the professional arena that author interviews have increasingly been framed as organs of advice online. Writers’ organizations and publications aimed at professional writers regularly run such series. *Publishers Weekly*, *Writers Digest*, the Society of Authors, and *The Writers & Artists Yearbook* all offer author interviews on their websites, which target professional and aspiring writers. Since 2011, the latter has hosted a publisher-run website which offers “an extensive collection of free advice articles on the writing and publishing process” (Bloomsbury

2018). In its “Advice” section, which also includes tips on revision, style, and developing an idea, the website offers readers access to author interviews. These short Q&A interviews are explicitly tailored to an expected audience of aspiring writer-readers. A heterogeneous array of authors are profiled at different stages in their careers: Joanna Trollope rubs shoulders with Stephen Poliakoff, George Szirtes with Sally Gardner, and a series of debut authors of crime, literary, and young adult fiction are interviewed. Such varied modeling of authorship helps to position the website, and the publishing industry more broadly, as a democratic community open to a number of different authorial identities, trajectories, and ambitions.

More explicitly than the “Art of Fiction” or “How Writers Work,” the questions asked by the *Writers & Artists* website deliberately focus on details that an anticipative author might like to know. Thus, Alexander McCall Smith is asked, among other prompts: “Describe the route to your first novel being published,” “How has having a literary agent helped you?” and the ever-popular “What advice would you give to an aspiring novelist?” (Herbert, n.d.) The questions asked of Benjamin Zephaniah are similar: “What poets do you admire?” “How do you write,” “Describe your route to being published,” and “What’s your advice for an aspiring poet?” (Writers & Artists, n.d.) Such questions implore the subject to share their journey to publication, the ubiquitous marker of success, with the reader, in addition to any tips they have picked up along the way. In between discussion of prizes and book deals, the interviews also mention childcare responsibilities, other jobs, and the distractions of social media. Presenting writing as an activity rooted within patterns of daily life with which the (Western) reader can likely relate, these interviews (like those of *Everyman*) present the author-subject as an aspirational, yet relatable figure. Similar domestic duties, or a shared nostalgic memory of reading a certain book as a child, become entry points by which readers can imagine themselves taking the next step in a journey that leads toward publication.

In addition to its general author series, the *Writers & Artists* website also offers two other interview series: those with self-published authors and those with industry experts. The former follows a similar format to the general author series, asking subjects what inspires them and if they have any advice for aspiring writers. However, it tends to highlight practical questions about the self-publishing process and experience. Subjects are asked why they chose the self-publishing route, whether they have an agent, and particularly how they market their books and

interact with readers. These questions help to position self-publishing as a discrete sector of the industry, with its own norms, challenges, and advantages, while offering models of authorship, writing, and publication for potential writer-readers. The series of interviews with experts, by contrast, offers insight into the broader publishing industry, its roles, culture, and relations with the author. In interviews with commissioning editors, booksellers, and agents, readers are introduced to these figures, their function within the industry, and even their expectations, pet peeves, and reading habits. As is the case with Web 2.0 more generally, on this website we see the content of the earlier “How Writers Write” interviews dis-aggregated into several more tailored interview series, conceived for distinct readerships.

The proliferation of author interviews in multimedia settings (whether the platform interview at Hay Festival, the radio interviews with Terry Gross on *Fresh Air*, or the “Twitterview”) and their perceived importance by the publishing industry has led to a new sub-field of advice literature: advice on how to conduct author interviews. Often geared to help writers navigate social media, interviews are frequently posited as an effective means of engaging with audiences and promoting work. Print interviews for online publications are frequently composed via email, lacking resources, and with little engagement between parties; the resulting interviews are rarely the most engaging example of their format.

The proliferation of author interviews has, in correspondence with recent trends in literary advice, occasioned a number of parodied or negative examples. In 2015 *The Toast*, a “humor site with a heavy focus on literary, pop culture, and general nerdy content for a primarily female audience aged 18–35,” ran an article entitled “How to Interview a Woman Writer.” The article, by writer and “social media specialist (yes really),” Beulah Maud Devaney offers such helpful tips as:

If she is attractive; tell your readers exactly how attractive, within the first paragraph. Speculate on whether she is attracted to you.

[...]

If she writes about a non-Western country; see if you can find a dead white guy to quote. It will help orientate any readers who are feeling panicked.

Here’s a helpful guide:

- India: Walt Whitman or Rudyard Kipling
- China: W. Somerset Maugham



- The Caribbean: Graham Greene
- Africa the country: Joseph Conrad or Winston Churchill

[...]

If she has written a biography; ask if she did it so people would like her. (Devaney 2015)

Unsurprisingly, the article was enthusiastically received by *The Toast*'s readers, who piled in to offer their own witty suggestions: “If she has children, ask her how she finds the time to write. Insinuate that she’s probably a bad mother, like Medea before her. If she doesn’t have children and is over 30, speculate whether that gaping loss informs her writing” (Frumiosa 2015). Such “advice” helps this community to articulate what they conceive as the limitations of models of authorship promoted within the broader literary industry. It also underlines the degree to which author interviews are perceived as conveying more indirect advice than that relayed via specific questions. By modeling norms, author interviews can aid enculturation (in publics and counterpublics), but they can also exclude; they can signal that a reader is not welcome in a particular community.

## CONCLUSION

The connection between the author interview and literary advice is ultimately an amorphous (and often not articulated) one, both on- and offline. Enabling enculturation into writing communities and identities, author interviews can act as an implicit source of advice for aspiring and mature writers. Many can also be read for their explicit advice on technique and such. Author interviews also have non-advice functions, whether promotional, aesthetic, or even individualized data provision. In the age of social media, these functions are sometimes dis-aggregated, but the process is rarely complete. The heterogeneity of the author interview has proven useful and we see different interview series articulating the specifics of their relationship to the writing profession, the academy, and general readers via their varying deployment of the literary advice genre. Although in our era of tablets and voice assistants the query “do you use a pencil or a pen” might seem to invoke gradually outdated media, the potential of such a question is still vast: whether or not we read for literary advice.

## NOTES

1. I draw here on Michael Warner's theoretical conception of the public (Warner 2002).
2. McGurl (2009) offers a useful parallel history of the emergence of creative writing as a discipline in American higher education.
3. I discuss this at more length in Roach (2017).
4. See Roach (2015) for further discussion of the series and Morgan.
5. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/series>, accessed 10 April 2018.
6. "The Author Resurrected" is Wilbur's title phrase.
7. Williams (2018) offers an excellent history of the emergence of the critical interview since the 1970s.

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## “Stand Out from the Crowd!”: Literary Advice in Online Writing Communities

*Bronwen Thomas*

### BACKGROUND TO LITERARY ADVICE ONLINE

In the digital age, aspiring writers can draw on advice from a wide range of online sources, including social media platforms, fan communities, and crowdfunded publishers. The support offered can range from writing prompts in the form of tweets or GIFs to blog or vlog posts examining specific questions of form or genre. Writing formations found online can similarly range from informal or ephemeral “affinity groups” (Gee and Haynes 2012) coalescing around hashtags (#writersofinstagram) to long-standing Facebook groups or dedicated forums where the social bonds forming between participants may extend to the offline world and include support and advice extending beyond writing to lifestyle and life choices (Thomas 2011a). Online spaces can also disrupt and challenge how advice is traditionally dispensed and filtered to allow for the emergence of new kinds of cultural intermediaries and new “hidden forms of mediation” (Wright 2014, p. 191) drawing on automated data and algorithms. Much of this advice may be unsolicited and may have very little

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perceptible impact on individual writers or their writing. Nevertheless, it contributes to a contemporary climate hailed as democratic (Pugh 2005) where the roles of writer and reader are more fluid and interchangeable, and where writing is archived, curated, and shared among users. While some established writers and critics have queried the perpetuation of the myth that “*anyone* can write a book” (Harris in Flood 2015), and that demands on the expertise of professionals can be made without any kind of boundary or limit, writing emerging from these platforms can gain mainstream commercial and critical success, sometimes also lending itself to adaptation and spreading across media.

Previous periods, particularly the end of the nineteenth century and the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, have been claimed as key turning points in relation to the democratization of writing (Hilliard 2006), with magazines, writing clubs, and literary guidebooks making transparent the “secrets” of good writing. More recently, fanfiction communities have been recognized for nurturing aspiring writers, particularly through the mentorship of “beta-readers” and the practice of publishing in installments, to allow writers and their readers to engage in dialogue throughout the constantly updated writing process (Thomas 2011b). Moreover, in the specific context of the affinity groups and networks of online fan communities, Campbell et al. (2016) argue for a distinctive kind of “distributed mentoring” where advice and support comes from many different sources, and where expertise may also be variously distributed. According to Campbell et al., this results in a richer experience for those involved and necessitates a broader view than focusing on individual pieces of advice or the relationship between individuals and their mentors. However, in the case of fanfiction, the culture has been predominantly one of writing for self-enrichment and pleasure, participating in a “gift economy” based on barter and exchange (Davies 2017), where labor is freely shared rather than engaging in marketing and promotion strategies increasingly expected of professional or commercial authors. A notable exception is China, where fanfiction sites often distinguish between free content and paid-for stories, sometimes housed in “VIP” areas or rooms.

Nevertheless, the creative industries have increasingly recognized and, some would argue, exploited fan cultures and their creative outputs, while high-profile authors such as E. L. James and Cassandra Clare have not only profited from their tutelage as fanfiction writers, but have also

demonstrated the potential for the worlds they create to generate trans-media stories. This has led to ongoing debates around the concept of “fan labor,” the rise of the “fentrepreneur” (Carter 2017), and the extent to which seemingly participatory practices are in fact symptomatic of neoliberalism and its emphasis on individualism (Marwick 2015). All of this in the context of what many see as the narrowing of the focus of traditional publishers on “marketable” authors to the neglect of new authors or mid-listers (Bold 2016), and attacks on mainstream publishing for its lack of diversity. Thus, online spaces are hailed by some for performing “the admirable service of discovering audiences where traditional publishing hadn’t the resources or interest to explore” (Danaher 2014). Alongside this, digitization has led to a proliferation of opportunities for writers to self-publish, and to challenge the snobbery and elitism that has tended to look down on these practices in the past. Increased access to data on reading from online platforms (Bold 2016) also provides opportunities for writers to map and respond to trends and preferences among their potential readership.

Among the many start-ups that have attempted to build writing communities and cater to the needs of aspiring authors, Describli (2012–2017) specifically pitched itself as a space where writers could learn to “stand out from the crowd”. Set up by Laura Fredericks and using platforms such as Indiegogo to generate income, the “data-driven marketing assistant” for writers specifically addressed itself to self-publishing authors and focused on helping them connect with their “perfect” audiences. The fact that Describli did not manage to survive as a sustainable business model is itself testimony to the vagaries of the “attention economy” described by Davenport and Beck (2002). Nevertheless, the Internet and social media platforms continue to provide new and competing sources of advice and support for writers.

One of the biggest and most successful of online writing communities, instantly recognizable from its distinctive orange branding and in-group terminology, is the Canadian-based Wattpad, founded in 2006 by Allen Lau and Ivan Yuen. In this chapter, following Campbell et al. (2016), I will provide a broad view of the kinds of advice to writers available to users of Wattpad by exploring various sources both on- and off-site. In addition, I will focus on the ways in which this exposes and addresses age-old tensions between literariness and commerciality, and between the myth of the author as undiscovered solitary genius and the practical business of writing as a collaborative process reliant on multiple agents. I will also



focus on how the notion of success in writing is measured by “Wattpadders,” and the extent to which the community can foster diversity and innovation.

## THE RISE OF WATTPAD

Wattpad’s oft retold origin myth is that it was born “on the back of a napkin” at Vancouver airport by the two entrepreneurs (Cuccinello 2018), with the explicit intention of setting its sights on “the walls” erected by media companies to reserve stories for the “elite few” (Wattpad HQ “About”). Since its inception, Wattpad’s mission statements have continued to reinforce the idea that the company is built on freedom, honesty, and inclusivity. Yet its business model is explicitly reliant on building a “captivated audience,” and on demonstrating that the data it produces can provide “deep engagement” for businesses of all kinds with Millennials and Gen Z consumers (Wattpad “Press”).

The origin story, and the founders’ backgrounds as “people of color, who are also immigrants,” is mentioned in the company’s Diversity and Inclusion report as evidence of their “commitment to diversity” (Lakhani 2018). In the same report, we learn that 56% of the workforce is female, but the percentage of the 65 million global users who are female (and under 30) is assumed to be much higher based on Wattpad’s “reputation for being the reading site of choice for 13-18-year-old-girls” (Davies 2017, p. 55). Wattpad allows users to choose which language they want to use to navigate the site and which language they want to select for the stories they will read and write. While not entirely comprehensive (my first language Welsh does not feature), and with some languages only having limited content, the very fact that this is an option again suggests a commitment to inclusivity and supporting marginalized voices. In addition, Wattpad’s openness is reflected in the fact that it understands writing and reading stories as existing in a convergent media landscape where the boundaries and divides between creators and consumers, as well as between genres and media platforms are constantly being eroded. Not only do many of the stories produced by users refer to characters, worlds, and tropes from a range of media, but the site also explicitly locates writing success in the context of producing content that can be reproduced and adapted across media, most explicitly with its Wattpad Studios program, which aims to link the most popular writers with media executives.

Often described as a “YouTube for Stories,” with 90% of its activity taking place on mobile devices (Davies 2017), Wattpad provides “access to an audience of millions” as an “on-the-go experience” with the promise that “if you can’t find exactly what you are looking for, you have the power to create it yourself” (Wattpad “About”). Images on the “About” section of the main website, largely group shots of young people from different ethnic backgrounds, place the focus on sociality and inclusivity. However, they also speak to the need to be “captivated” and “immersed” with an image of a solitary female seemingly absorbed in creating content on her smartphone, and a link to a video where we see the female subject engaged in composing her story in and around her daily activities. We then watch as the story she creates, “Escape the Grind,” is published and shared with others as a counter registers the number of views, likes, and comments that the story attracts. The story concludes with the author experiencing the ultimate thrill of meeting one of her readers “IRL” (in real life) as he leaves his phone open on the front cover of her story as he buys a drink in the coffee shop where she works. In many ways, this fictional version of a writer’s Wattpad journey encapsulates its powerful but also contradictory ethos of supporting diversity and individual tastes while also constantly focusing on popularity and success, continuing to perpetuate myths of authorship while also purporting to break down barriers between authors and readers.

Both in terms of the kind of experience offered to users and the content that dominates the site, Wattpad clearly draws on fanfiction models. The word “community” is used liberally across the site and the language throughout emphasizes reciprocity and the ethos of sharing. However, since its inception Wattpad has continued to develop and evolve, often risking alienating some of its core users, and like many social media platforms and networks, constantly seeking out new business models and ways of monetizing content.

In April 2019, in a move reminiscent of the development of fanfiction in China (Feng 2011; Rochester 2019), and sites such as Patreon and Ko-fi which rely on fans or patrons funding creative projects, Wattpad introduced a “Paid Stories” option for users. By using the site’s own pseudo-currency system, “coins,” this unlocks additional content, offering exclusivity and “seamless reading” experiences for purchasers, while at the same time stressing the benefits that this “support” offers writers. Paid Stories (developed in beta as “Wattpad Next”) thus provides a contemporary version of literary patronage where the transaction between reader

and writer appears direct and unmediated, and where the emphasis is on mutual benefit. Alongside Wattpad's introduction of a publishing imprint, Wattpad Books, and Wattpad Studios, which "works with media executives to single out stories that have a great chance of commercial success," this marks a clear shift away from the gift economy of fanfiction. It also further exposes the hierarchies and divisions existing within the so-called community, between those who subscribe to the Premium (ad free) service and those who either cannot or will not pay for content, as well as the less overt differences which may exist between those with the time, pre-existing knowledge, and expertise to maximize their chances of success and those who are less experienced, less well-resourced, or less confident in promoting their writing.

### HOW TO GET AHEAD ON WATTPAD

Wattpad relentlessly exhorts users to engage with and create content (#JustWriteIt) with a strong focus on spontaneity ("Don't Think, Write!") and lots of exclamatory and directive language ("Get Reads"). However, the language of the site additionally seems to assume users already have pre-formed tastes and preferences, promising to cater to "whatever you're into," and claiming content is based on "everything you love about storytelling." As with fanfiction, content is primarily categorized according to established and familiar genres ("Horror"; "Mystery"; "Romance"), although in the case of Wattpad, the categories also reflect current online trends like the horror-related "creepypasta" and the push for diversity in categories like "Diverse Lit" and "LGBT+." Advice to writers on the site includes specific sections on genre while the annual awards, the Wattys, have bespoke categories such as romance writing ("The Heartbreakers").

The focus on genre and familiarity sits alongside a commitment to uncovering new voices, with the tension between inclusivity and unearthing new talent extending to the often explicit, but sometimes covert, ways in which the site erects hierarchies among users. The Editors' Choice section, much like the section in many bookstores, invites users to "Check out the latest and greatest stories hand-picked by our team" although the criteria used for judging these selected stories, or even who the Editors are, remains a mystery. However, the idea that not all users are equal is perhaps most explicit with the Wattpad Stars program, which provides the site's most popular writers with paid writing jobs

and other tools for monetizing their stories. Wattpad Stars are selected or “tapped” based on proving themselves through positive community-member engagement (ideally by growing their base of readers) and by regularly updating their content. Likewise, the site’s “Ambassadors,” who “volunteer” to “support the community” through various activities including organizing content and answering questions, must fulfill certain criteria, which include being active on the site for at least six months and being prepared to dedicate at least four hours per week to their duties. In addition, they have to be seen to uphold community guidelines and Wattpad values, including altruism and open-mindedness.

In many ways this is a departure from the practices established around beta-reading in fanfiction communities, where anyone is free to offer their services to other users, and where no overt signs of differential status in relation to users are made beyond the fact that a particular beta reader might be named and thanked by those she/he has helped. This reflects the ways in which Wattpad is more overtly oriented toward the commercial and also the broader changes affecting online cultures, with increasing acceptance of the need for more recognition and reward for contributing to communities, while at the same time pursuing individual success.

Wattpad’s most high-profile success stories reflect these inherent contradictions, as they both perpetuate the idea that anyone can succeed as a writer while at the same time subscribing to the myth of the undiscovered genius. Thus Anna Todd’s backstory of selling waffles and writing to occupy her time as her boyfriend served overseas, or Beth Reekles’s journey, juggling her career as a writer with studying physics at university in the UK, provides inspirational role models for the millions of young writers (a majority of whom are women) hoping to follow in their footsteps. In particular, Reekles has produced a TEDxTeen talk (2014) recounting her “journey” from writing in secret to feeling “validated” by the responses her stories received on Wattpad. She also reports on how young writers seek her advice, and echoes the Wattpad mission statement in exhorting others to “write the book you want to read.” At the same time, both Todd and Reekles have undoubtedly gained authority and credibility through traditional print publishing, and Wattpad has also benefited from the endorsement of established writers such as Margaret Atwood who has expressed her enthusiasm for the ability the platform offers writers to “guinea-pig yourself and to stretch the boundaries” (Atwood 2012).

## OFF-SITE SOURCES OF ADVICE FOR WATTPADDERS

Perhaps unsurprisingly because of Wattpad's sheer scale, the tensions and contradictions underlying its ethos, and the constant pressure to "stand out from the crowd," a number of books, websites, and blogs have emerged to cater for those keen to learn more about the community and how to maximize their chances of success. Alongside the endorsements of high-profile Wattpad success stories, accounts of user experiences, good and bad, are readily available. Negative experiences include accounts of individuals who have been adversely affected by the need for constant validation, or from those who have felt addicted to the platform as a result of heavy usage, as well as the effect that the competition to be noticed and gain readers can have on personal relationships. Others report leaving Wattpad to try their luck with smaller writing communities, while parents of younger Wattpadders have voiced their concerns about access to adult content and the potential for grooming and abuse accompanying any online forum.

Advice from experienced Wattpadders sometimes focuses on practical matters such as navigating the site's interface (Jones 2017), choosing categories to "game the system" (Biel 2017), and ensuring that your stories get noticed. According to Benet (2013), for other Wattpadders, the key is understanding that the site is a social network and that there are no short cuts when it comes to joining in and cultivating relationships. From the perspective of Myron (2014), who experienced Wattpad first hand, one of the attractions of the site, particularly for "old dogs" trying to gain new audiences, is that the relationship between author and reader results in a distinctive kind of self-discipline born out of a sense of duty or obligation to keep posting new content, thus guarding against the "meandering" that can inhibit writers and prevent them from completing projects. Blog posts and articles on Wattpad tend to be written by "old dogs" who have been pursuing writing careers for some time and who have come to Wattpad after trying other routes to success. Of course, off-site advice may also be readily found via anecdotes or discussions on social media and good old-fashioned word of mouth, as in the case of Beth Reekles, who recounts how a friend first recommended that she should give the writing community a try.

## ON-SITE ADVICE AND SUPPORT

Even if they are not lucky enough to be enrolled onto the Wattpad “Stars” program with its structured system of coaching, aspiring writers can access advice from multiple sources across the site, including informal settings such as The Café or The Pub, or bespoke groups such as the “Under 5 k Reads Club”. Users can seek out more specific and “expert” advice from the Story Services section, where they will find posts advertising writing buddies, editorial services, which are often but not always for free, and services offering help with selecting covers and graphics for stories. As well as being able to access user profiles and statistics to ratify the credentials of potential mentors, Wattpad uses a system of badges to identify “Stars” and “Ambassadors,” and to reward “Feedback Gurus” for posting helpful comments.

Elsewhere, the Wattpad Help Center has a section on “Writing” with detailed advice about how to create and publish a story, as well as advice on promotion tactics and analytics. Including buttons for common options such as “Promote Your Story,” a “support bot” is also on hand to answer any questions not covered elsewhere. Content guidelines give advice on how to rate stories for elements such as “mature” content, to ensure a “respectful” space for users, and lists prohibited content such as images of self-harm and non-consensual sexual content. Advice also consists of generic blog-style posts from users and videos which range from topics titled “About Writing” (in the form of a video) to “Get Inspired” (a section which features tips from multiple Wattpad users). The videos in particular work to provide personalized, rich, and sometimes entertaining content for those who may be less interested or stimulated by advice in the form of books or articles.

From the main website, the “Write” tab takes the user to a section called “Writer Opportunities,” with further tabs on “Resources,” and “Programs & Opportunities” as well as motivational messages, and Writer FAQs on Rights, Copyright, and Monetization. Once again, the language focuses on connecting and “reaching out,” but coupled with a sense that this must be purposeful and directed at the “right readers.” The “Resources” section also explicitly refers to the idea of a writing career, with reminders of the site’s connections with the creative industries, references to “entertainment partners,” and quotations from publishers.

The “Resources” section has three subsections: “Get Inspired,” “Sharpen Your Skills,” and “Build Your Audience.” In turn each of these

subsections is further broken down into subsections and posts combining exhortations and motivational language (Write On!) with advice, tips, and prompts on a wide range of topics. Thus under “Stay Motivated” users can find sections on overcoming writer’s block and even a “Mental Health & Wellness Toolkit,” countering the constant calls to action with at least some acknowledgment that the community needs to consider the well-being of users. This section features general advice about common conditions such as anxiety and depression and specific issues likely to face Wattpad users including “writer burnout” and “fan pressure.” Although implicitly the advice offered here suggests that the feelings may be caused by the nature of the activities taking place on Wattpad such as “pressure to keep up” and “the constant need to appease fans/followers,” recommending pursuing alternate activities to alleviate the pressure, the site also hints that these suggestions are temporary measures, easily achieved and remedied. At no point is there any admission of liability, and the user is directed to external resources exclusively for teens and youth.

As suggested earlier, in addition to this focus on well-being, the “Resources” section also departs from literary advice models more familiar from print cultures in the amount of attention focused on audience-building and promotion. While the well-being sections clearly demonstrate an acknowledgment of the link between the pressure to succeed and anxiety and stress, as previously suggested, there is no escape from the constant focus on winning, standing out, and becoming popular in terms of the resources on offer. WattCon is mentioned repeatedly throughout the section and has its own dedicated space in “Programs & Opportunities.” Likewise, the language of the “Build Your Audience” section is uncompromising and unapologetic about becoming a “Writerpreneur” and developing a personal “brand.” With phrasing like “Hook Your Reader” and “A Writer’s Weapon,” readers are imagined as resources to be won or prey to be tracked down by the writer-hero, and although the talk is still centered on engagement, the idea of community and reciprocity somehow seems to have been lost.

Sections like “Sharpen Your Skills” provide more familiar advice for writers on aspects of craft including characterization, point of view, and dialogue, expanding into subsections on editing, revising, and “Writing for Genre and Preparing for Publication.” Some posts, for example “How to Become a Better Writer,” offer a range of exercises as well as guidance on grammar and active/passive voice. Again, users can check out the profile of the author of the guide (Tonya Snow-Cook) and the number

of reads it has had (300343k as of 17/4/19) if they want reassurance about the credibility of the advice. Other posts are not explicitly linked to specific authors or users but carry the Wattpad logo and reflect their corporate ethos (“Writing Diverse Characters”).

In addition to the section on Resources, the “Writer” tab has a drop-down menu for “Programs & Opportunities,” including information on the Wattys, Paid Stories, and Wattcon. In the case of the Wattys or the Stars program, some of the advice about how to “Become a Wattpad Star” or “Win Awards” may be more aspirational than practical. Nevertheless, the provision of these programs and opportunities is relentlessly presented as something accessible to anyone and helps reinforce the idea that self-improvement and following prescribed programs are the ways to ensure success.

## USER COMMENTS

Online writing communities make it possible for users to follow the development of a story from inception to completion and to interact with the author and other readers to offer encouragement and suggestions for improvement (Thomas 2011b). On Wattpad, for each installment of a story, users can leave both inline and end comments. While inline comments tend to come at the end of paragraphs or lines of dialogue, the number of comments left does not always correspond directly to obviously significant matters such as plot or character development. Sometimes comments consist purely of emojis or affective responses to the actions depicted (“Aww”), and as Thomas (2011b) notes in relation to fanfiction, comments may be expressions of support and encouragement rather than suggestions for improvement. However, occasionally comments may pull up writers on lapses in grammar or ask for clarifications or expansions. Sometimes commenters post remarks before they have even started reading (“so excited”) and continue commenting throughout the story to its completion, while others only comment once. Opening lines and titles tend to receive a lot of comments, particularly where the author has clearly aimed for dramatic impact. Comments tend to come in clusters, offering the opportunity for users to respond to others’ opinions, or perhaps providing some camouflage for less confident or experienced users. Even where stories are heavily commented on, however, these only represent a fragment of the readers viewing and liking the story.



Authors may explicitly refer in their notes or prefaces to revisions and improvements undertaken over the course of writing and may interact directly with other users through the “Conversations” tab on their profiles. This can provide a space for authors to explicitly seek out encouragement and advice from readers (such as “Where do yall (sic) want the book to go?”), and to report on struggles with writing or to announce that more stories are forthcoming. It can also allow authors the opportunity to impart advice and encouragement to followers, or to respond to queries about themselves or their work.

Peer-to-peer advice undoubtedly helps to mitigate against some of the more corporate and success-oriented language of the general advice sections. While the emphasis may be on providing encouragement and support rather than detailed advice or feedback, where suggestions for improvement are given, these are often qualified or hedged (“I don’t have a lot of experience,” or “I will see what I can do!”) rather than offered from a position of absolute authority or expertise. As with fanfiction sites, on Wattpad aspiring writers not only build audiences, but also can build their own informal networks and communities through the reciprocal act of reading and commenting on the work of others, and by becoming active members of forums or community groups. Although Pugh’s 2005 study of fanfiction sites suggested that in fact authors rarely changed stories in response to reader feedback, interactions between authors and readers contribute not only in terms of relationship-building and community growth, but also in terms of creating the sense of participating in the narrative as an ongoing process rather than finished product (Thomas 2011b).

## CONCLUSION

Close inspection of the language of much of the advice available to writers on Wattpad’s main website might raise questions about the extent to which it can genuinely support diverse voices in the way it suggests, and certainly the tensions between discovering and supporting success versus providing a sense of community are very apparent. Writing is very much conceived of as a business, competition between writers is encouraged implicitly (and sometimes overtly), and perhaps what the arrival of “coins” and “Paid Stories” demonstrates most clearly is that as in every other era and sphere, success and popularity may be very much driven by resources and experienced by only very few of the millions of users. What

perhaps distinguishes Wattpad from previous examples of literary advice which focus on the commercial and professional aspects of writing, is the sense of urgency that is conveyed, and the linking of success with personal popularity.

Nevertheless, taking a broader view of the range of advice offered both on the website and from other sources presents a more complex picture. As with fanfiction, the criteria for success in writing on Wattpad may be quite different from mainstream and literary publishing, particularly in terms of how quality or originality are understood (Thomas 2011a), and in terms of how the relationship between author and reader is conceived. In addition, as with fanfiction, Wattpad may be argued to provide interesting insights into the processes of writing and reading (online), as well as important correctives to prevailing and emerging myths around the creative process. Whether or not Wattpad will produce memorable works of literature, and whether or not it will survive as competitors emerge, and disquiet surrounding changes made to the site persists, it offers a new iteration of what fan communities have been providing for a generation, through its overt espousal of a commercial ethos and through its facilitation of easily accessed advice and support on-the-go.

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PART II

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Case Studies of Literary Advice



# Tools for Shaping Stories? Visual Plot Models in a Sample of Anglo-American Advice Handbooks

*Liorah Hoek*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2009, narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan pointed out that, despite half a century of narratology and more than a century of literary advice, we still have not significantly advanced our knowledge of what constitutes a good story. She observes that:

Narrative is said to consist of story and discourse, but the vast majority of narratological work has focused either on the latter, or, with socio-linguistic approaches, on the pragmatics of narrative communication, leaving “storyology”—the study of the logic that binds events into plots—mostly to scriptwriters and authors of “How To” manuals”. What Jerome Bruner wrote in 1986 unfortunately still holds largely true, despite the attention given in the meantime to the notion of tellability: “In contrast to our vast knowledge of how science and logical reasoning proceeds, we know

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precious little in any formal sense about how to make good stories.” (Ryan 2009, p. 73)

Yet, one of the few things that storyologists agree on is that a well-structured, strong plot is a basic story element. In the present chapter, I will therefore examine the storyological advice with regard to plot in sixteen popular Anglo-American handbooks for both novels and screenplays, published since 1979 and still in use today. The corpus is representative of what is on offer for today’s aspiring author, looking for guidance on plot. The selection has been made on the basis of the top twenty lists of recommended books on plot, screenwriting and novels on Amazon and Goodreads.<sup>1</sup> Five handbooks deal directly with plot, four books focus on novel writing. For the selection of seven screenwriting manuals, I used the list of 32 most influential screenplay manuals provided by Bridget Conor in “Gurus and Oscar Winners: How-To Screenwriting Manuals in the New Cultural Economy” (Conor 2012, p. 126).

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Title</i>                          | <i>Author</i>              | <i>Handbook focus</i>   |
|-------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1979        | <i>Screenplay</i>                     | Syd Field                  | Screenplay              |
| 1982        | <i>Writing Fiction</i>                | Janet Burroway             | Novel                   |
| 1983        | <i>The Art of Fiction</i>             | John Gardner               | Novel                   |
| 1987        | <i>How to Write a Damn Good Novel</i> | James N.Frey               | Novel                   |
| 1988        | <i>Plot</i>                           | Ansen Dibell               | Plot                    |
| 1992        | <i>Story</i>                          | Robert McKee               | Screenplay              |
| 1992        | <i>The Writer’s Journey</i>           | Christopher Vogler         | Screenplay <sup>a</sup> |
| 1993        | <i>20 Master Plots</i>                | Ronald B. Tobias           | Plot                    |
| 2002        | <i>The Plot Thickens</i>              | Noah Lukeman               | Plot                    |
| 2004        | <i>Plot &amp; Structure</i>           | James Scott Bell           | Plot                    |
| 2004        | <i>The Sequence Approach</i>          | Paul Joseph Gulino         | Screenplay              |
| 2005        | <i>Save the Cat!</i>                  | Blake Snyder               | Screenplay              |
| 2007        | <i>Alternative Scriptwriting</i>      | Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush | Screenplay              |
| 2010        | <i>The 21st Century Screenplay</i>    | Linda Aronson              | Screenplay              |
| 2011        | <i>The Plot Whisperer</i>             | Martha Alderson            | Plot                    |
| 2012        | <i>Writing 21st Century Fiction</i>   | Donald Maass               | Novel                   |

<sup>a</sup>Vogler’s screenwriting handbook can be seen as a plot handbook as it is the leading handbook on the Hero’s Journey model for both screenwriting and novel writing

## VISUAL PLOT MODELS AS CENTRAL NODES

Since their emergence in the late nineteenth century, literary advice handbooks have often used visual plot models to aid in constructing plots. As Andrew Levy notes:

By far the most popular scientific trope was the plot diagram, which became such a frequent feature of the handbooks (and such a frequent object of criticism) that authors often apologized for their appearance. (Levy 1993, p. 94)

These plot models are not mere illustrations, but rather are presented as tools for structuring a story. Some of the models have become so commonplace nowadays that even when they are not depicted, they are still referred to, so we can assume that the images somehow operate in the back of handbook authors' minds when they describe plot and explain how to create one. In that sense, visual plot models function as central nodes in clusters of ideas, metaphors, and terms related to specific models. Furthermore, plot models usually define a preferred kind of plot or an ideal type of story, while excluding other options to structure stories.

In this chapter, the visual models will be the starting point of the analysis, supplemented by textual analysis of the surrounding text to discern the most common and dominant ideas about plot. Our discussion of the visual plot models is based on Johanna Drucker's concept of "graphesis" (Drucker 2011, 2014), and Marie-Laure Ryan's work on "visual narratology" (Ryan 2003, 2007). Drucker proposes the concept "graphesis" to indicate the study of the visual production of knowledge, where the graphical representation is both the means and object of study. Like Drucker, Ryan argues that graphic representations "are not merely a tool for representing narratological knowledge, but an important way to produce this knowledge. At their very best, they can be the seed of a new theory" (Ryan 2007, p. 12). For this purpose, Drucker distinguishes between "representations," which are static in relation to what they reference, and "knowledge generators," that have a dynamic, open-ended relation to what they can provoke (Drucker 2014, p. 65).<sup>2</sup> Combining these two approaches, our study seeks to contribute to a further understanding of how visual depictions construct certain influential ideas about plot and about making stories, as part of an attempt to look at plot from the writer's perspective. In other words, we will examine potential and



emerging plots, rather than the existing and finished plots that are the main focus of narratology.

### IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS... ARISTOTLE

When looking at the most common and influential plot models in our corpus, it is immediately evident that linear models are dominant, with the exception of one model with a polar origin and one with a circular origin. These linear models can be traced back to what is termed the Aristotelean three-act structure. This classical model is cited or referred to in nearly all of the creative writing handbooks and is based on Aristotle's ideas in his *Poetics*: "tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude; for there may be a whole that is wanting in magnitude. A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end" (Aristotle 1898, p 31).<sup>3</sup> Next to this three-act structure, Aristotle defines five "quantitative" parts of the tragedy: prologue, episode, exode, parode, and stasimon, which have become the model for the classical five-act play.<sup>4</sup> Finally, he describes two movements, "complication" and "unraveling" which are separated by a reversal of fortune for the protagonist, called the "peripeteia." While Aristotle did not necessarily visualize this model, the way in which the three-act model is used in handbooks is linear, showing the three acts as consecutive stages of the story.

This structure is deemed to be the dominant paradigm for screenplays and novels alike. Most handbook authors, however, consider a definition of beginning, middle, and end not specific enough to be of much help when constructing a story. When referring to the Aristotelian three-act structure, authors, often unknowingly, refer to further elaborations of the model by playwrights and scholars, like Eugene Scribe's idea of the "well-made play" formulated around 1825 (Lanouette 2012), or the ideas of Freytag or Field (both discussed below). One common elaboration is that of the "master plots," or story patterns with similar content and story development, supposed to reoccur throughout history and different cultures.<sup>5</sup> Even when authors discuss alternative story structures, most of them try to fit them into the three-act paradigm. Aronson, for instance, undertakes a comprehensive study of what she terms "parallel plots," structures with multiple protagonists or time jumps, but she insists on using the three-act paradigm as a tool, which leaves her with either partial visualizations or virtually illegible models (Aronson 2010, pp. 275, 283–284, 323, 326, 393).

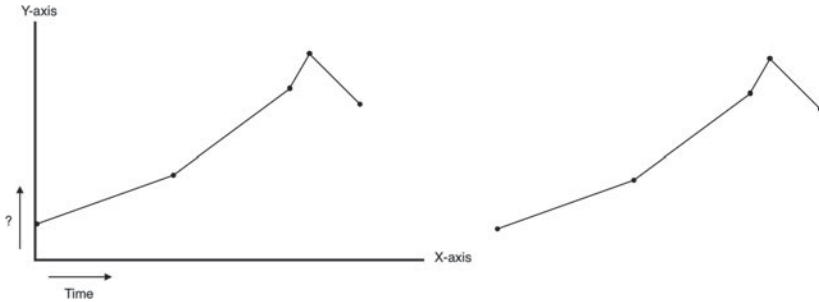
Not only Aristotelian thought, but also drama theory in a broader sense has unmistakably influenced the discourse about plot in the handbooks. Central in most handbooks is, for instance, the notion of “dramatic writing” or dramatic tension. “A ‘DAMN GOOD NOVEL’ is intense, and to be intense a novel must be dramatic” (Frey 1987, p. xiii). Like Frey, many other authors of manuals (including Aronson, Dancyger and Rush, Field, Gulino, and Vogler) agree that dramatic writing is the topic of their book. Others like Bell, Burroway, Gardner, Maass, McKee, and Tobias claim that dramatic writing is writing which achieves the best possible effects, or just assume that every good story is dramatic. The term “dramatic writing” can probably be traced back to William Archer’s *Play-Making* (1912). Archer here distinguishes between “dramatic writing,” with a central rapidly developing crisis which is appropriate for plays, and “undramatic writing,” suited for the writing of novels, which describe a gradual development. The definition of dramatic writing in the selected handbooks is not attributed to Archer, however, but is best presented by what McKee calls the “arch plot” or “classical design”:

Classical design means a story built around an active protagonist who struggles against primarily external forces of antagonism to pursue his or her desire, through continuous time, within a consistent and causally connected fictional reality, to a closed ending of absolute, irreversible change. (McKee 2004, p. 45)

This dramatic writing paradigm is best suited for telling stories that can be resolved within the limited time frame of a play or a movie, but it is also dominant in handbooks that focus on novel writing, the very medium excluded from Archer’s term “dramatic writing.” Moreover, it can be linked to the most dominant mode of visual representation found in handbooks, which is linear.

### A DEVELOPMENT OF LINEAR PLOT MODELS: FROM “FREYTAG’S PYRAMID” TO “FIELD’S PARADIGM”

Linear plot models in advice handbooks presume a unidirectional and uninterrupted flow of time from the beginning to the end of the story. The plot model is constructed as a diagram with an X-axis representing the flow of time from beginning to end and the Y-axis representing that



**Fig. 7.1** Left: underlying structure of most linear plot models, with fictive plotline; Right: the most common appearance of linear models only features a plotline, without context or axes

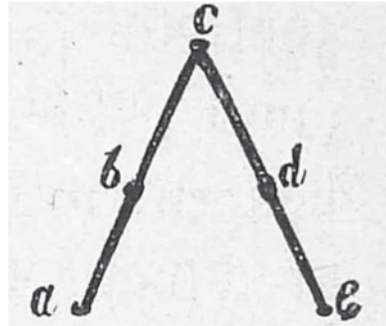
which changes over the course of a story. This results in a line that represents the plot: the plotline (Fig. 7.1).

Linear models differ from each other in two main respects. Firstly, the most important distinctions are found in what these models represent on the Y-axis, which represents the feature of the story that is measured as changing during the story. Secondly, some of the authors suggest only one possible plotline found in all stories. Others will argue that the actual plotline is (slightly) different for every story and is thus a variation on an ideal type of plotline.

One of the most influential and older linear models is the pyramid of Gustav Freytag, which is an elaboration of the Aristotelean five-act drama. Freytag's Pyramid, therefore, is not a tool for constructing plots, but rather a description of the most popular five-act plays of his era (Lanouette 2012; James 2013). Especially the associated "rising action" toward a climax' can be found in almost all contemporary manuals. Freytag depicts it as such (Fig. 7.2):

These parts of the drama, (a) introduction, (b) rise, (c) climax (d) return or fall, (e) catastrophe, have each what is peculiar in purpose and in construction. Between them stand three important scenic effects, through which the parts are separated as well as bound together. Of these three dramatic moments, or crises, one which indicates the beginning of the stirring action, stands between the introduction and the rise; the second, the beginning of the counteraction, between the climax and the return; the third, which must rise once more before the catastrophe, between the

Fig. 7.2 Freytag's original version (Freytag [1863] 1911, p. 183)



return and the catastrophe. They are called here the exciting moment or force, the tragic moment or force, and the moment or force of the last suspense. (Freytag 1896)

The concept of time within a story is conceived in terms of action and counteraction. But what is actually meant by the “rising” and “falling” of action? Freytag describes rising and falling as the “complicating” action and the consequent “unraveling” of this complication, much like Aristotle’s two movements. Contemporary handbooks interpret this rising and falling motion as the rising and waning of tension, either for the protagonist, or tension for the reader or audience. The fact that this distinction is seldom explicitly made implies that the tension of the reader is presumed to equal that of the protagonist.

While Freytag’s model intends to describe a five-act structure, this is not always evident, because some of the parts are represented by lines, indicating periods of time, whereas others are depicted by dots, that represent moments in time. As a consequence, all contemporary handbooks use the model as if it is a three-act structure with the introduction as the first act and rising and falling as the second act and the catastrophe or *dénouement* as the third act. Moreover, whereas Freytag situates the climax at the exact midpoint of the story, most authors in our corpus consider this midpoint climax to be outdated and rather place the climax later in the story, making the rising action more prominent, as in Burroway’s version (Fig. 7.3).

Informed by the work of Aristotle, Freytag, Scribe, and other sources, screenwriting guru Syd Field proposes one of the most influential plot models in his bestseller *Screenplay* (1979). “Field’s Paradigm” is the

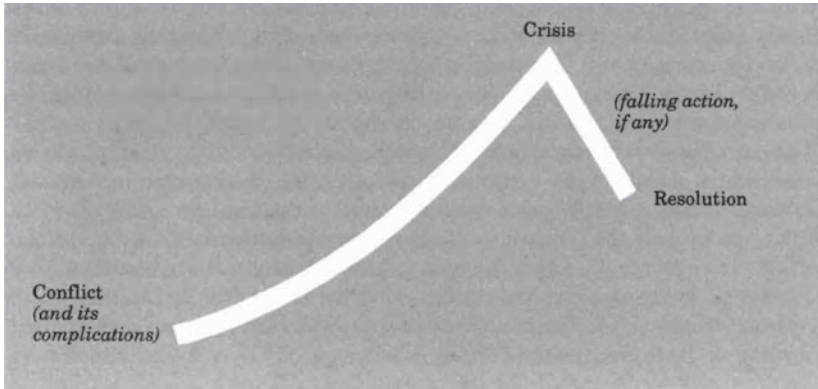


Fig. 7.3 Burroway’s version of Freytag’s Pyramid (Burroway 1982, p. 44)

prototypical Hollywood movie model, but it has also crossed genres from the screenwriting trade, into that of handbooks for fiction and novels. In fact, when handbook authors refer to the Aristotelean three-act structure, they often actually use the three-act structure of Field’s Paradigm (e.g., Bell 2004, p. 32; McKee 1997, p. 218; Snyder 2005, p. 101; Vogler 2007, p. 8). Field’s main additions to existing three-act models are his depiction of turning points, and the addition of a page count, indicating the proportion of the acts (1/4 of the page count for both beginning and end and 1/2 of the page count for the middle) (Fig. 7.4).

| Beginning           | Middle        | End                 |
|---------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| Act I               | Act II        | Act III             |
| pp. 1-30            | pp. 30-90     | pp. 90-120          |
| Set-Up              | Confrontation | Resolution          |
| <u>Plot Point 1</u> |               | <u>Plot Point 2</u> |

Fig. 7.4 Field’s Paradigm (Field 1979, p. 21, revised version)

Field's model is thus not descriptive like Aristotle's or Freytag's, but explicitly aims to be a tool to create screenplays. The thoughts or feelings of characters are invisible in a movie, so everything in a story has to be translated into actions, preferably against external forces. This is why Field advocates "visual storytelling" (ibid., p. 3). In the model, terms like "set-up," "confrontation," and "resolution"<sup>6</sup> add narrative meaning to the otherwise formal structure of three acts, allowing for simpler plot construction for a concrete story.

Following Field, all handbooks in our corpus mention a number of turning points in which the story gains momentum by changing the direction of the plot. Most authors (except Gardner, Maas, and Tobias) introduce more than just the two turning points at the act transitions of Field's Paradigm.<sup>7</sup> The most common extra plot points are all based on Freytag's work: "midpoint," "crisis," "climax," and similar to the "the stirring action" of Freytag, an event early in the plot which sets the story in motion, called the "inciting incident," "disturbance," or "call to adventure." The influence of Field's Paradigm is not limited to time-constrained Hollywood narratives. Increasingly, it turns up in plot handbooks focused on novels, such as Alderson, who replicates Field's proportions of the acts for novels (Aronson 2010, pp. xii–xiii), and Vogler, who states that the middle is "a hundred pages of your novel" (Vogler 2007, p. 159).

A last variation on the structural linear model is found in *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* (1983), where novelist and creative writing teacher John Gardner introduces the "Fichtean Curve" as a model for plotting a novel. He attributes this model to the German philosopher Johan Gottlieb Fichte, although this attribution is probably inaccurate.<sup>8</sup> This model, which was thought to precede the pyramid of Freytag, is likely of a more recent date and maybe even based on the work of Freytag. Gardner presents "the Fichtean Curve" in the following manner (Fig. 7.5):

Let line a represent the "normal" course of action; that is, the course the character would take if he cared only for safety and stability and so did not assert his independent will, trying the difficult or impossible in the hope of effecting change. Let line b represent the course of action our character does take, struggling against odds and braving conflict. The descending arrows represent forces (enemies, custom, or natural law) that work against the character's will, and the ascending arrows represent forces that support him in his enterprise. The peak of the ascending line (b) represents the

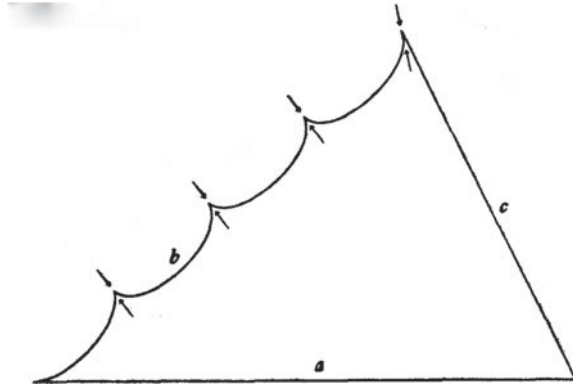


Fig. 7.5 Gardner's refined version of "Fichtean Curve" (Gardner 1983, p. 188)

novel's climactic moment; and line *c* represents all that follows—that is, the denouement: The conflict is now resolved, or in the process of resolving, either because the will of the central character has been overwhelmed or because he has won and his situation is once more stabilizing. A chart of the novel's emotional development (our feeling of suspense, fascination, or anxiety as we read) is, then, Fichte's curve. Since the ascending action is in fact not smooth but moves through a series of increasingly intense climaxes (the episodic rhythm of the novel), a refined version of the curve might be the following. (Gardner 1983, pp. 187–188)

The most puzzling feature of this model is that it is called a curve, despite its undeniable triangular shape. The resemblance to Freytag's Pyramid is unmistakable. Like the pyramid, it builds toward a climax.

In the "Fichtean Curve," the story is set in motion by the exercise of free will of an active protagonist. This is different from Freytag's "stirring action," which is not initiated by the protagonist per se. The space above line *b* is defined as the area of the antagonist and more action, whereas the space under line *b* is defined as the realm of the protagonist and the helpers and less active moments. As the strong-willed character meets more opposition, conflict intensifies, and propels the story forward. At first glance, this presentation seems to be a spatial model, but the text indicates that the trajectory does not represent a movement through space, but rather an emotional development of the protagonist.

In many handbooks this specific kind of plotline is defined as the “character arc” (Aronson 2010, p. 93; Bell 2004, pp. 141–151; Field 2005, p. 51; Gulino 2015, p. 33; Lukeman 2002, p. 92, McKee 1997, p. 103; Vogler 2007, p. 205). This arc is supposed to follow the action as closely as possible, and preferably completely coincides with the action, because action that leads to character change is considered to be a superior way of plotting. The same line that represents the emotional development of the protagonist also traces the emotional development of the reader. This gives us a triple reading of the plotline: it represents the action of the protagonist, the emotional development of the protagonist, and at the same time the emotions of the reader. However, the only way to combine these different readings is to see the emotions of the reader and the development of the protagonist both as a function resulting from the protagonist’s actions.

## A POLAR AND A CIRCULAR MODEL BOTH BECOME LINEAR

There are at least two influential models that have neither a three-act structure as their foundation nor follow a linear model from their origin.

The polar model (Figs. 7.6 and 7.7) is rarely used independently, but is embedded in many other models. It probably has its origin in Aristotle’s description of the *peripeteia*: “the sequence of events, according to the law of probability or necessity, will admit of a change from bad fortune to good fortune, or from good fortune to bad” (Aristotle 1898, p. 33). It depicts story structure as an alternation of good and ill fortune for the main character and is goal-oriented, focusing on the “dramatic need” (a common term used for the ultimate goal) of the protagonist, or sometimes on the central idea of the story. In order to build up tension for the reader to a climax, the reader is suspended between hope (good fortune) and fear (ill fortune).<sup>9</sup> The terms “happy” and “sad” endings that are linked to this model not only refer to the fortune of the protagonist, but also to the presumed emotions of the reader.

A further influential model, “the Hero’s Journey,” developed by Joseph Campbell, is based on his study of universal story progression in the myths, legends, and traditions of many cultures.<sup>10</sup> This model is also known as “mythical structure” or “monomyth.” Interestingly, Campbell does not seem to base his theory on Aristotle, hence his resulting circular, rather than linear, model. The original picture can be found in Campbell’s popular book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) (Fig. 7.8).



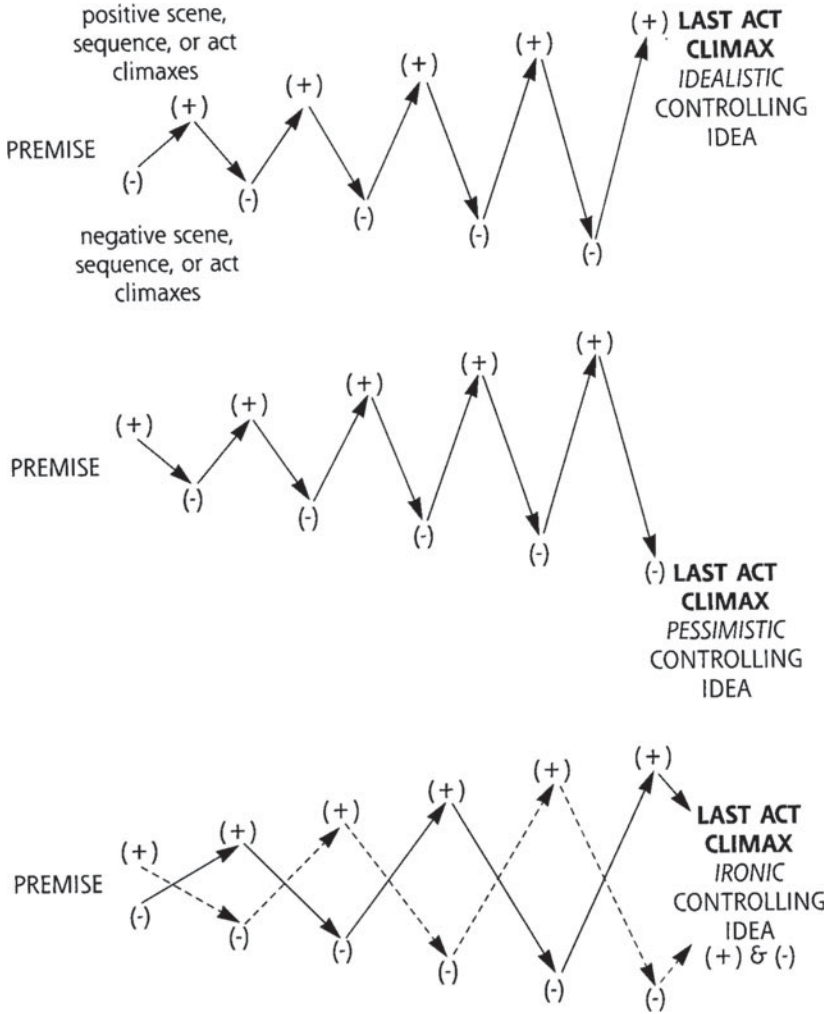


Fig. 7.6 Polar model by McKee (2004, p. 123)

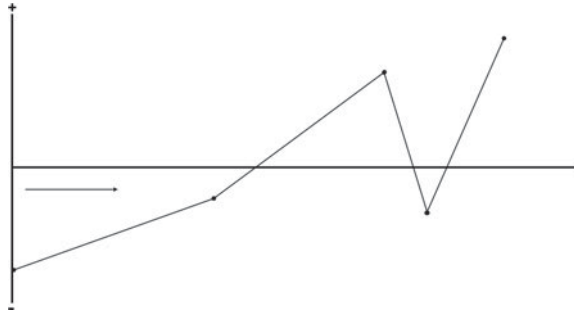


Fig. 7.7 More common linear version with fictive plotline, as for instance used by Kurt Vonnegut in a film about the “shape of stories” (Vonnegut 2004)

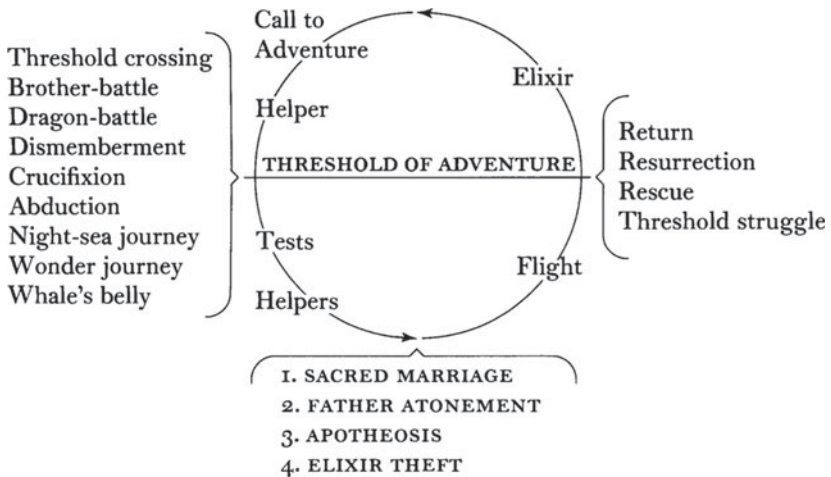


Fig. 7.8 Campbell’s version of The Hero’s Journey (Campbell 2004, p. 227)

The hero’s journey in Campbell’s version consists of nineteen stages which are integrated into three larger movements: “separation,” “initiation,” and “return.”<sup>11</sup> The hero is first shown in his everyday environment, when he receives a call to adventure, and leaves on a journey to another world where he has to overcome several trials, eventually returning to the ordinary world a changed man with special gifts or abilities that are useful to his community.<sup>12</sup> Intriguingly, the arrow to indicate

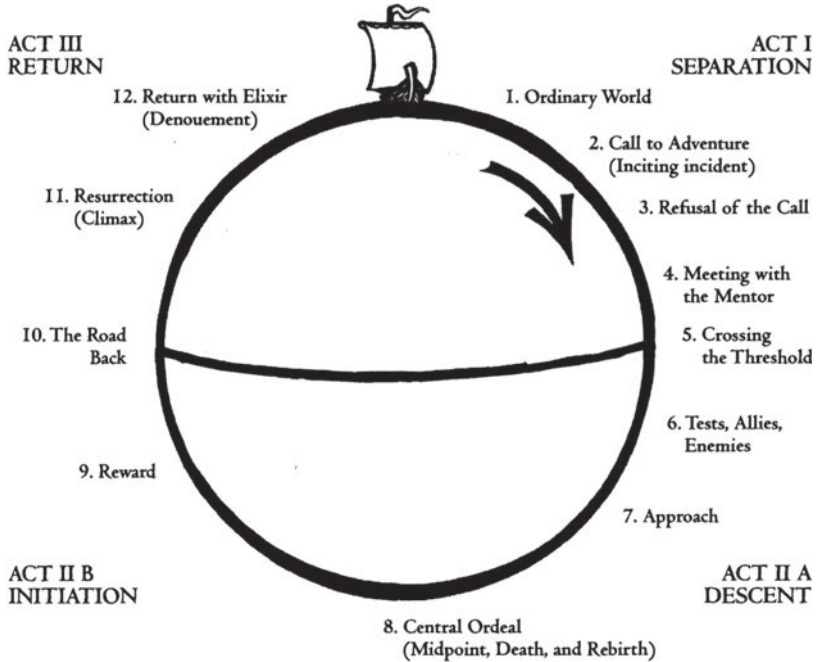


Fig. 7.9 Circular version of Hero's Journey by Vogler (Vogler 2007, p. 9)

the movement of story development is depicted as a counterclockwise movement, but Campbell does not explain why this is the case. This counterclockwise movement emphasizes the circular motion, but the story is not temporally circular, as the end does not return to the events at the beginning; hence, the circularity is likely symbolic.

This model allows for at least three readings. The first is a geographical reading, where the arrows indicate the path of the protagonist through space. The second reading interprets the model as a network of certain events or locations, wherein the lines represent how these events are connected. A third possible reading is to see the model as a flowchart or a depiction of the process of the hero's personal transformation. To complicate matters, instead of Campbell's original, usually a popularized version is used in handbooks, introduced by Christopher Vogler in his

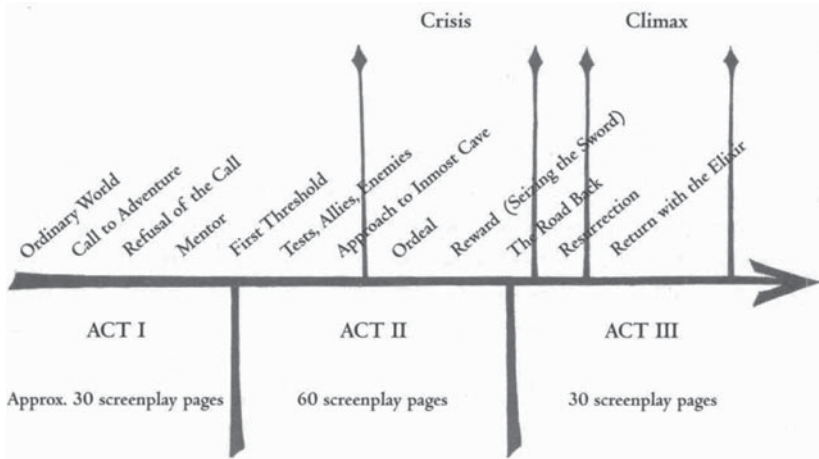


Fig. 7.10 Three-act linear version of Hero's Journey by Vogler (2007, p. 8)

influential handbook *The Writer's Journey-Mythical Structure for Writers* (1992) (Fig. 7.9). Vogler depicts the model in various different ways.

In this version of Vogler's representation, the Hero's Journey is clockwise and the visual metaphor chosen for the geographical interpretation of the model is a globe with a sailing ship. Time passing in this version is equal to travel time (Fig. 7.9).

Because Vogler's handbook primarily addresses screenwriters, although he states that the model is valid for all stories (Vogler 2007, pp. xv, xvii, xix), he integrates Field's Paradigm and Freytag's notions of "crisis" and "climax," and reworks it into a linear model (Fig. 7.10). Thus, the popularized version of the Hero's Journey by Vogler used in most handbooks (Fig. 7.9) becomes a linear model which perfectly fits the three-act structure.

### THE MOUNTAIN MODEL, A SYNTHESIS

Although the three-act structure is the underlying model for the large majority of plot structures in handbooks, it does not account for all characteristics attributed to plot, nor can any of the previously mentioned models account for the ideas on plot occurring in single volumes by sole authors. Even when handbook authors present one specific model, they

seldom restrict themselves to that model exclusively in their texts. The greater part of the handbooks, in fact, contain several models merged into one, which is presented as a unified concept of plot. Field himself, for instance, depicts his own paradigm, but refers to Campbell in the text, and also discusses the active protagonist and the centrality of conflict so prominent in Gardner’s model.

While it thus seems that every author concocts their own mix of ideas about plot by borrowing from different models, on closer inspection,

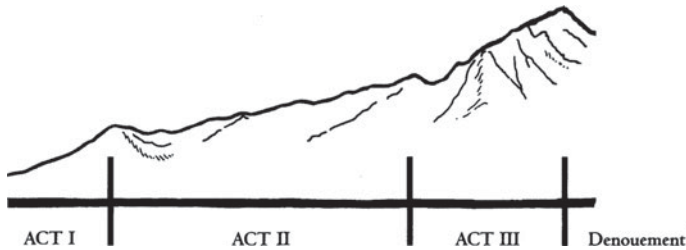


Fig. 7.11 Mountain Model by Vogler (2007, p. 158)

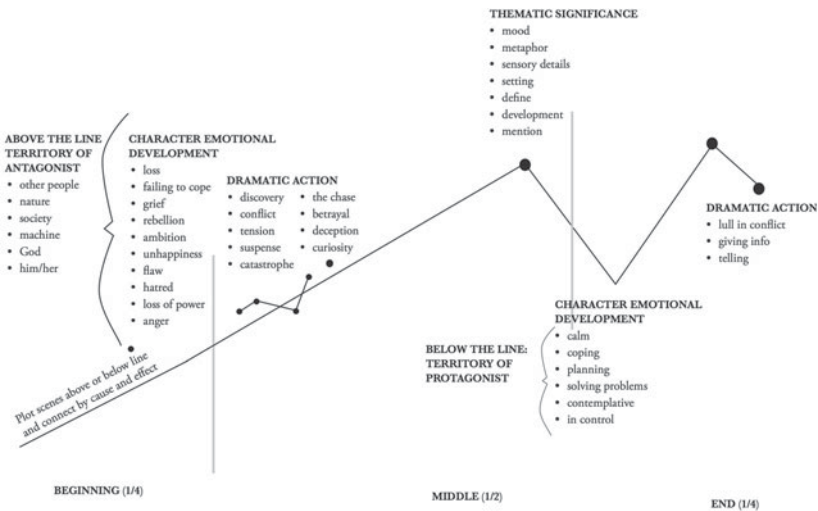


Fig. 7.12 Mountain Model by Alderson (2011, pp. xii–xiii)

one model incorporates all of the proposed plot models into one single representation: the so-called Mountain Model (Figs. 7.11 and 7.12). This model has probably evolved over time and cannot be attributed to any particular author, but the earliest representation of a mountain plot structure in our corpus can be found in the handbook of Burroway in 1982. In 1992 Vogler is the first in the corpus to introduce the name “Mountain Model.” He reconceptualizing plot as a protagonist climbing a mountain or a mountain range with valleys and peaks representing significant turning points in the story.

Rather than foregrounding one single idea about plot, the Mountain Model combines all common influential models into one graphic representation. It incorporates different, and at times even contradictory, interpretations of plot into a single image. In the Mountain Model, the Y-axis and plotline represent different content simultaneously:

1. The three-act structure
2. Freytag’s Pyramid pops up in the picture of a climax peak, with an upward slope for rising action and a downward slope for falling action. These slopes also represent story tension, like in contemporary conceptions of Freytag’s Pyramid.
3. The proportions of the parts of the mountain range resemble Field’s Paradigm and the set-up, confrontation, and resolution are often added. The turning points are integrated in the model as peaks and sometimes as valleys (often at the so-called crisis of the story).
4. John Gardner’s “Fichtean Curve” is found in the protagonist climbing the mountain. The mountain represents the character arc, action line, and emotional development of the reader as one completely synchronous trajectory. The heights are defined as the space of the antagonists, and the lows as the realm of the protagonist and less active scenes.
5. Like in the polar model, the peaks of the mountain represent good fortune, while valleys represent bad fortune.
6. The idea of the plot as a journey with challenges or ordeals that have to be overcome.

The Mountain Model not only integrates all these ideas, but it also envisions a specific position for the reader or audience of the story as an embodied image.

Johanna Drucker emphasizes the embodiedness of the graphic as rhetorical form: “All images have a point of view. They are all drawn from some place in relation to what is shown” (Drucker 2014, p. 149). The embodied view is particularly evident in Vogler’s image of the Mountain Model, where the mountain range is pictured in profile. This perspective suggests that we, as viewers or readers, stand firmly with our feet upon the ground, rooting for the protagonist as we watch her struggle high up in the mountains. However, we are also part of the story world in this picture, since we have the same viewpoint as any observing story character would have. In this way, the Mountain Model entails a spatiotemporal representation of both the protagonist’s and the reader’s process, which depicts the plot from within the world of the story.

Furthermore, the plotline that forms the mountain is ambiguous in its meaning as it represents multiple concepts at the same time. For instance, a peak in the mountain combines the following meanings: good fortune *and* a conflict with antagonists *and* an important step in the emotional development or transformation of the protagonist *and* a highpoint in the story tension. In a well-balanced story, however, these moments do not have to coincide, especially as some of them contradict each other: the protagonist’s good fortune usually does not occur exactly at the same moment as the worsening of conflict with an antagonist. In the Mountain Model, the high and low points of the protagonist, the story tension, the emotions of the reader, the alternation of good and bad fortune, and the character arc coincide, while different story lines collapse into one course, one plotline. As a result, the story is flattened. The possibilities in plot construction are limited, because different story layers are treated as only one single layer.

Still, there are some compelling indications that the Mountain Model is the most dominant model in handbooks. Firstly, the Mountain Model is depicted in a full version in the handbooks of Alderson (2011, pp. xii–xiii), Aronson (2010, p. 54), Dancyger and Rush (2007, p. 6), and Vogler (2007, pp. 157–158). A derived version is found in Burroway (1992, p. 46) and Bell (2004, p. 14, 128). By comparison, the three-act Structure and Field’s Paradigm together appear in six handbooks (Aronson 2010, p. 55; Bell 2004, p. 32, Field 2005, p. 21; McKee 1997, p. 218, Snyder 2005, p. 101; Vogler 2007, p. 8). Secondly, the Mountain Model constitutes a synthesis of all the influential plot models, and it can account for all dominant ideas about plot which can be found in a single handbook. It explains how very different story elements can be presented as

one unified idea comprised in the plot. It even provides an explanation for the use of contradictory ideas and the consequent confusion. An example of this confusion is found in Bell's distinction between commercial and literary plots.

The representation of the commercial plot (Fig. 7.13) is based on Freytag's idea of rising action toward a climax, however, setbacks and problems are depicted as indents in the graph, whereas in Freytag's conception they are part of the ascending line of the rising action. This use is more congruent with the polar model of "bad" versus "good" fortune, or the various climaxes of the Fichtean Curve.

When we look at the model of a literary plot (Fig. 7.14), the rising and falling of the line has nothing to do with Freytag's Pyramid. The line

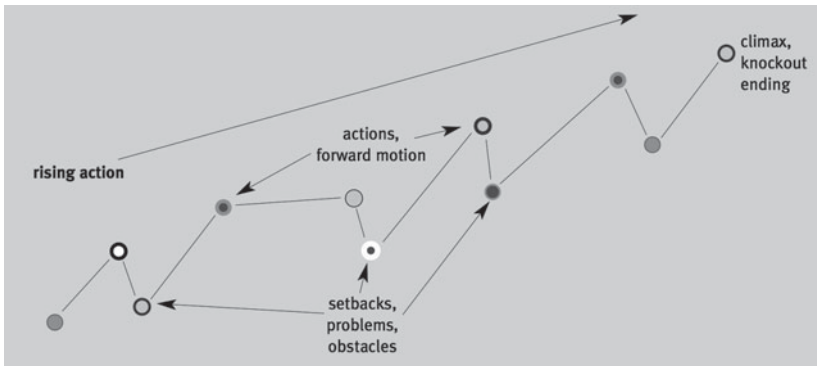


Fig. 7.13 A commercial plot according to Bell (2004, p. 14)

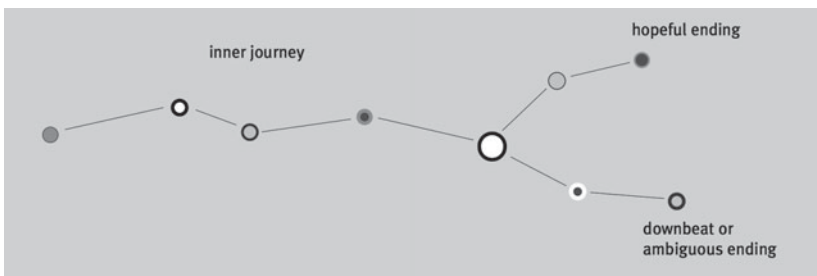


Fig. 7.14 A literary plot according to Bell (2004, p. 15)



traces sad or happy outcomes for the protagonist and the reader, like the polar model of reversal of fortune, and Bell uses the idea of the inner journey referring to Campbell's Hero's Journey. In this way, the same mountainous structure contains different and contradictory meanings that are presented as a unified idea about plot.

Additionally, some handbooks depict older models as a mountain. For instance, Burroway presents a mountainous version of Freytag's Pyramid for "Cinderella," while also integrating the Fichtean Curve and the polar model into her version of Freytag's Pyramid (Fig. 7.15).

Dancyger and Rush's depiction of the three-act structure is thus represented (Fig. 7.16).

Even in the context of another model or idea about plot, the mountain shape pops up quite often as the preferred model to explain what plot is and how to construct it.<sup>13</sup> The last and perhaps most important

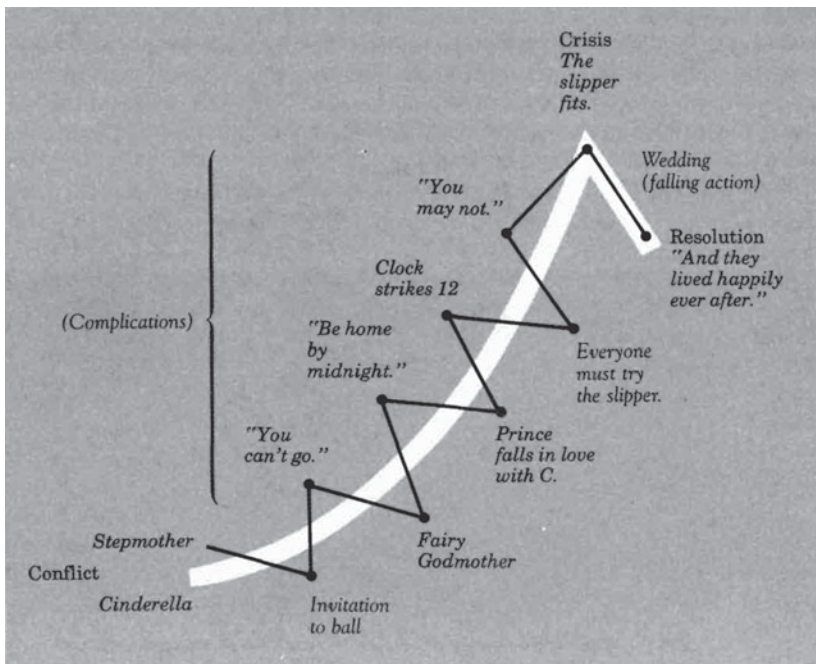
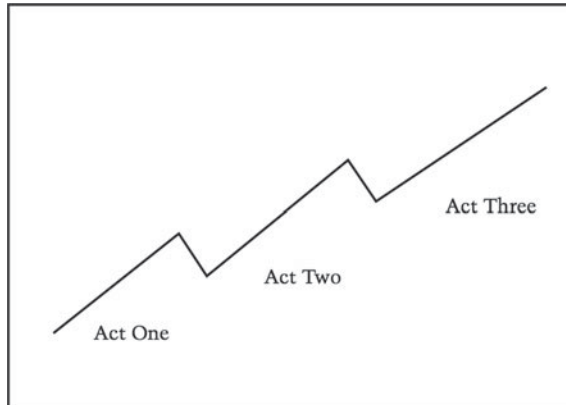


Fig. 7.15 Freytag's Pyramid as Mountain Model (Burroway 1992, p. 46)



**Fig. 7.16** Three-act structure as a Mountain Model (Dancyger and Rush 2007, p. 6)

reason to consider the Mountain Model as the dominant contemporary form for representing plot is that the defining parts of the Mountain Model are congruent with the dramatic writing paradigm heavily featured in writing handbooks, especially in terms of the active protagonist, the struggle against external forces of antagonism, continuous time, and the protagonist's personal transformation, as defined by McKee.

To conclude, the Mountain Model is more versatile than the preceding models, and at the same time allows for diversity of application, given that every handbook author can pick and choose which of the incorporated models they use to interpret the plotline. Aronson (2010), for instance, does not include the Hero's Journey as a part of the model, whereas in the versions of Alderson (2011) and Vogler (2007), the Hero's Journey provides one of the central interpretative frameworks. Moreover, not every mountain has to have the same number and positions of segments. Any number of turning points, peaks, valleys, or slopes can be added, with different angles and positioned at any point in the storyline without losing the integrity of the model. By choosing to depict a turning point as a peak, or inversely as a valley, the author can assign a certain function to a narrative moment. Some of the mountains depict the crisis as a peak, indicating a point of high story tension, whereas others depict the crisis as a low point, as bad fortune for the protagonist.

Although one could argue that every story could or should have a slightly different mountain, some literary advice handbooks still propose one particular mountain as the universal plot or the ideal type of plot. However, this model maintains the constraints of a linear model, especially concerning the temporal order of events. Moreover, the Mountain Model holds the particular restrictions that the protagonist is leading plot development, and that all the story lines collapse into one. It would, for instance, be a challenge to construct a plot based on dramatic irony.<sup>14</sup>

### PLOT MODELS AS GENERATIVE TOOLS WITH THE HERO'S JOURNEY

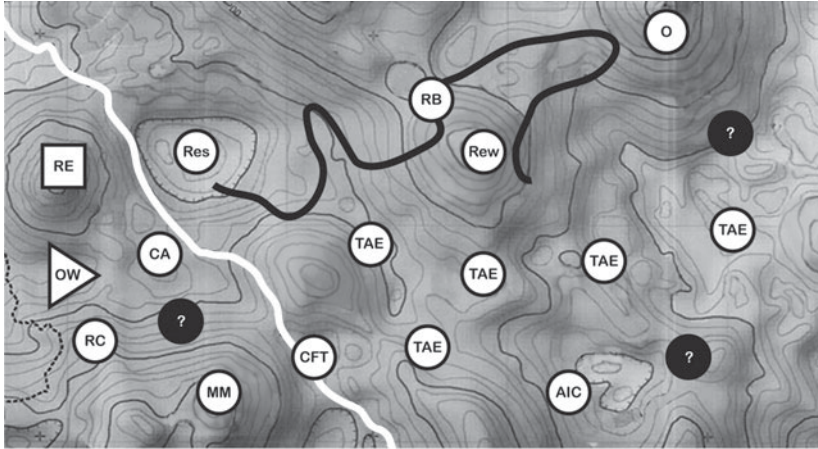
To show that with a few simple adjustments a plot model can become more of a dynamic tool than a visual description of a plot, I will remodel Vogler's Mountain Model version of the Hero's Journey. In his text Vogler describes a model that he does not depict:

If you get lost, refer to the metaphor as you would check a map on a journey. But don't mistake the map for the journey. You don't drive with a map pasted to your windshield. You consult it before setting out or when you get disoriented. The joy of a journey is not reading or following a map, but exploring unknown places and wandering off the map now and then. It's only by getting creatively lost, beyond the boundaries of tradition, that new discoveries can be made. (Vogler 2007, p. 233)

None of the plot models in our corpus defines space outside of the graph, allowing no room to wander off. In fact, the models provide an itinerary through a story space that is completely empty apart from the plot itself. So, applying Vogler's spatially oriented description, we may imagine the Hero's Journey as a topographical map of a mountain range (Fig. 7.17).

This topographical model transforms the sideways mountain range into a territory, creating a space instead of a line. The itinerary with a fixed route is transformed into a space that remains open to a diversity of possible journeys.

A topographical representation is more flexible than a linear model in several respects. Firstly, the temporal order of the plot elements is no longer fixed. Here the beginning and end are indicated by a triangle and a square, but that is not even necessary. Secondly, the question marks represent additional stages in the journey, which are made possible because

**In the Ordinary World:**

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| <b>OW</b>  | <b>Ordinary World (beginning, triangle)</b> |
| <b>CA</b>  | <b>Call to Adventure</b>                    |
| <b>RC</b>  | <b>Refusal of the Call</b>                  |
| <b>MM</b>  | <b>Meeting with the Mentor</b>              |
| <b>CFT</b> | <b>Crossing the First Threshold</b>         |
| <b>RE</b>  | <b>Return with the Elixir (End, square)</b> |

**In the Special World**

|            |  |
|------------|--|
| <b>TEA</b> | <b>Tests, Allies, Enemies (multiple)</b> |
| <b>AIC</b> | <b>Approach to the Inmost Cave</b>       |
| <b>O</b>   | <b>Ordeal</b>                            |
| <b>Rew</b> | <b>Reward</b>                            |
| <b>RB</b>  | <b>The Road Back (black line)</b>        |
| <b>Res</b> | <b>Resurrection</b>                      |

**In both worlds: black circles with question marks represent elements that could be added**

**Fig. 7.17** Hero's Journey as a geographical map of possibilities (*Source* Image by Marijn van der Waa and Liorah Hoek)

there is a space within which to wander. Thirdly, these extra points could be scenes or sequences in which the protagonist is not even present, thus, allowing for subplots to be easily integrated. Finally, the hero does not have to travel to all of the places indicated on the map, therefore, it becomes easier to introduce gaps in the timeline of the story or even leave stages out.

In my topographical model, the surface remains a mountain range, but of course it could be any real or imagined landscape, for instance, a map of the story world, or a network of concepts. Remodeling the Hero's Journey as a map of possibilities makes it much simpler to adapt the model to a particular story. Instead of a template, it becomes a tool to create different plots within the same paradigm. From a representation of a plot, it becomes, in Drucker's terms, a "knowledge generator" to create plots. Another visual representation of a plot model could reveal a much

broader scope of plots offered to (aspiring) writers and may show where and how the model can be adapted to serve the needs of a specific story.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have discussed the most common visual plot models that appear in contemporary handbooks, tracing their origin and interconnectedness. Although offered as tools, most of these models are in fact descriptions of finished stories. They are often offered as a one-size-fits-all solution for all stories, at least those published for broad audiences. In general, handbook authors provide little information how to adapt the model for a specific story. Remodeling the linear version of the most dominant Mountain Model into a topographical map of possibilities indicates how, by changing the representation of a model, the possibilities of plot construction can change dramatically. Even a restrictive, descriptive model can become a tool for plot construction, opening up possibilities not only for the common plot models that are proposed by the creative writing handbooks, but also for less common or even alternative story structures described by others.

Critical graphical analysis not only adds to textual analysis, but also provides a method of thinking about plot and narrative, especially when combined with the insight of writers.<sup>15</sup> Imagine if we would conceptualize a plot model meant to be a tool for creating different plots. That could be, to use Ryan's words, "the seed of a new theory" (Ryan 2007, p. 12). A storyology that concentrates on the emergence of stories opens up a spectrum of possibilities for (aspiring) writers, literary theorists, and narratologists alike.

## NOTES

1. The corpus consists mainly of American handbooks and is too small to compare American handbooks with English or Australian ones.
2. The analysis is also informed by Jacques Bertin's *The Semiology of Graphics* ([1967] 2011).
3. All of the authors in our corpus acknowledge Aristotle as the origin of their plot ideas, even though Mitch James posits that the Aristotelean origin of plot ideas rarely is acknowledged or even ignored in handbooks (James 2013).
4. The five-act play was considered the classical form for drama, not the three-act structure.

5. See, for instance, Lukeman, Maass, Tobias, and Snyder (who does not use the term, but uses the concept of a limited amount of story patterns). Sometimes these master plots are considered to be plot models or story patterns, but sometimes they are seen as genre models (e.g., Dancyger and Rush 1991; McKee 1997; Snyder 2005; Vogler 1992).
6. The set-up, confrontation, and resolution are known under other names, but the ideas on what must happen in each act are similar.
7. In his later work Field added a midpoint (Field 1984, pp. 131–146).
8. Research into the origins of the Fichtean Curve reveals that it is almost certainly not the work of the German philosopher Gottlieb Fichte, or, as leading Fichte expert professor Daniel Breazeale at the University of Kentucky puts it in an e-mail correspondence: “In any case, I feel quite confident in declaring that [the Fichtean Curve] has nothing at all to do with ‘our’ [philosopher Gottlieb] Fichte or his work. He certainly did not coin the term” (Personal communication 20 February 2019). Since Gardner, like many handbook authors, does not mention a source, the origin is a mystery. The triangular shape and the incorporation of the reader into one model suggest that it is probably a twentieth-century model.
9. The idea of hope and fear can be found in Gulino 2004 and is in my experience part of many writing courses.
10. His work is not based on Vladimir Propp’s formal analysis of the fairy tale, but he seems to employ the same method.
11. Note that Campbell does not depict the three larger stages, nor all of the substages.
12. A critique of the Hero’s Journey is that the whole idea of a journey is masculine, and that Campbell’s phases are based on male initiation rites. Maureen Murdock has rewritten the Hero’s Journey in *The Heroine’s Journey* as a self-help or therapeutic manual for women (Murdock 2013).
13. This seems to be a general trend in contemporary representations of the older models. A simple Google image search with the queries: “three-act structure,” “Fichtean Curve,” or “Freytag’s Pyramid” results in a large diversity of mountain models.
14. With the plotline of the protagonist and that of the reader collapsing into one course, this model does not provide an obvious way to create a difference in knowledge between characters and reader that is important for dramatic irony and similar effects.
15. As a further study, it would be useful to look at the reception of these models by writers and how these models are used in the writing practice.

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# The “Ready-Made-Writer” in a Selection of Contemporary Francophone Literary Advice Manuals

*Françoise Grauby*

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

“On the scene of literary enunciation, the author always presents and expresses himself or herself equipped with his *persona* or posture” insists Jérôme Meizoz (Meizoz 2009, p. 2). “*Posture*,” “ethos,” and “*persona*” are terms referring to the importance of the art and style of declaring oneself an author in the literary field. If, as Meizoz suggests, authorial stance takes effect at the time of publication, at the moment of the author’s official recognition, can we then assume that discourses on the writer’s voice and body which infiltrate literary advice manuals intended to teach the art of writing, contribute to the making of the author as much as technical guidelines? The terms “voice” and “body” are consciously

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employed here in reference to a notion of authorial stance that closely intertwines ethics and aesthetics. This entrenched condition of “art” and “manner,” a kind of corporeal dramaturgy which is considered an essential prerequisite to creation, is referred to as “posture” by Jérôme Meizoz. Emphasizing its theatrical nature, José-Luis Diaz prefers to speak of an “auctorial scenography” which “functions first and foremost in terms of adopted postures, proposed self-images and role-playing” (Diaz 2007, p. 11). For Meizoz, the authorial stance refers to the game that is played “on the scene of literary enunciation and to the mask that is attached to the author” (Meizoz 2007, p. 7). While, as Meizoz has argued in his research on Jean-Jacques Rousseau, posture is not a product of an era of (mass) media, the game of seduction that defines it is nonetheless inherent to the public dimension of all literary activity.

Let us recall some historical perspectives on authorial ethos developed by Meizoz, following Bourdieu (1980) and Viala and Molinié (1993). Derived from the Latin “*positura*” (disposition), the word “*posture*” can be understood both literally (as a particular position of the body) and figuratively (as a moral attitude and/or social condition). Barthes recognizes that “One copies a role, then, by metonymy, an art: I begin producing by reproducing the person I want to be” (Barthes 1994, p. 103). The notion of *posture*, as taken up and developed by Meizoz, refers to the manufacturing of a writer’s self, through the management of both his verbal discourse and his public, literary conditions. This concept evokes Paul Valéry’s sentiment: “To write, means to step on stage – The author must not proclaim that he’s not a performer. There’s no escaping the role” (Valéry 2007, p. 317).

Writers express their stance through a series of indicators: a particular style, choice of literary genre, register, themes, and a variety of paratextual signs ranging from the cover of a book to the mention of biographical details, interviews, correspondence, and essays on the art of writing. The sum of these culminate in a certain way of presenting oneself in the public arena. Non-discursive indicators also play a considerable role in the representation of self, such as the way one dresses, poses in front of a library shelf, or behaves and reacts in response to solicitations. Liesbeth Korthals Altes (2014) rightly mentions the author Houellebecq’s charged silences, which may suggest a stance of marginality or unease. Furthermore, Houellebecq is a contemporary author whose postures are frequently deciphered with such observations: “Aware of the stakes of the media coverage of a writer, Houellebecq involves his entire public

persona in the promotion of his novels and even *includes it in the space of the work itself*: his writings and the posture that promotes them become part of one and the same performance” (Meizoz 2014, p. 5).

The perspectives offered by Meizoz and Diaz, as well as the research carried out by Ruth Amossy (1999) and Dominique Maingueneau (2004) on discursive ethos, provide us with new pathways to consider how the authority and values of a writer are socially negotiated on the public scene, in particular through formats which could be described as “ready-mades.” Diaz, for instance, speculates that aspiring writers consulting literary history may select from the “ready-made” “repertoire of existing *postures* on the market” (Diaz in Amossy and Maingueneau 2009, p. 2). There can be no *coming to writing* without an awareness of the self as a writing subject.

This brings us to the postures of authors put forward by literary advice manuals and how they paint a picture of their readers as legitimate artists and credible writers, as well as the ethical and aesthetic options they propose as indicators of the posture of the budding writer. By obeying the demands of a particular didactic genre and subscribing to the practice of writing workshops, literary advice manuals suggest different ways of inhabiting a creative space. In trying to teach their readers how to behave professionally, they present them with authorial images which are filtered through existing literary models, and are therefore invested with a collective imagination. As such, they offer a kind of identity card for the writer, which is in accordance with a culturally expected archetype. As Sylvie Ducas argues, “becoming a writer and acting as a writer come together in one and the same phantasm” (Ducas 2002, p. 208). If, according to Diaz, “the way of being, the lifestyle, the way of behaving and posing, what he has at his disposition to construct an identity, are [...] just as essential to a writer as the way in which he writes,” then literary advice manuals must include a corporal ethos, postures, and images of the self, which aspiring authors can adopt when they make the decision to write and to be published (Diaz in Amossy and Maingueneau 2009, p. 2). There can be no product without a producer, no novel without an author.

This chapter will examine five twenty-first-century Francophone literary advice manuals that represent the dominant discourse of this tradition: Nadège Devaux, *L'ABC de l'écrivain* (2006, The Writer's ABC); Faly Stachak, *Ecrire: 350 techniques d'écriture* (2006, Writing: 350 Writing Techniques); Louis Timbal-Duclaux, *J'écris mon premier roman* (2009, I Write my First Novel); Bernard Baudouin, *Comment écrire votre*

*premier livre* (2002, *How to Write your First Book*); and Alain André, *Devenir écrivain* (2007, *Becoming a Writer*).<sup>2</sup> These works contain examples of daily writing practices and offer individual exercises to the aspiring writer, while also providing advice on ethos and *posture*. Indeed, in every apprentice, a desire for recognition lies dormant: the question of who to be (or who to succeed in being) as a writer on the literary scene becomes a guiding force of his or her writing process and publication projects. As the title indicates, *Devenir Ecrivain* is a work soliciting aspiring writers to create “(a) novel in which you are the hero” because ultimately “it is about knowing what kind of writer you could be” (André 2007, pp. 8, 33). Faly Stachak adds of the author: “You are the greatest hero of this universe!” (Stachak 2006, p. 163). Alain André contemplates the “kind of qualities should you preferably have in order to embark on this adventure” of writing (André 2007, pp. 33–34) and proceeds to underline the indispensability of sensitivity and innocence with regard to the creative act, the importance of maintaining a wholesome distance, and the necessity of working hard. He summarizes these qualities in a stylized formula in which the author is turned into something of an explorer of literature. An oxymoronic logic, sensitive yet resistant, is established to provide us with a key image of the contender for the title of author.

Even if a book, with its quality as a literary artifact, is the desired outcome, its production cannot be envisioned without the fiction of its producer, who constructs and makes visible a creative self. In this respect, it is worth recalling Paul Valéry’s words: “(t)hey write to recreate themselves” (Valéry 2000, p. 251), which highlight that a “fiction of the author” accompanies and supports any declarative position. This underlying portrait of the author goes hand in hand with the apprenticeship of the art of writing. The channeling of creative energy, perceived as an uncontrollable power that transforms a concept into a material object through hard work and discipline, is accompanied by several distinct yet complementary postures. According to Timbal-Duclaux, from the visionary creator to the apprentice, and finally to the small entrepreneur “a writer is like a small one-man business who works for the benefit of large companies: the press and publishing groups” (Timbal-Duclaux 2009, p. 150). Every applicant must make their entry into the field and this requires a series of decisions concerning appearance, context, and literary and postural heritage, as well as their personal literary production. We will study the stages of creation as postulated in literary advice

manuals by comparing them to a number of “collective scenographies” (Diaz 2007, p. 40).

## THE BIRTH OF THE CREATOR

### *Body and Energy*

Adopting a writerly posture implies the appropriation of a number of character traits and habits, among which physical characteristics play an important role. The artist’s body, considered as the external physiognomy of an internal system, must learn to self-style and function within a coherent aesthetic regime. Given that the body is visible and tangible, its expressive qualities are decoded and exploited for strategic purposes. Bourdieu’s “bodily hexis” described as the “political mythology realized, embodied, turned into a permanent disposition, durable manner of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking” (Bourdieu 1977, pp. 93–94), immediately intervenes in the form of a voluntary commitment for the author’s desire to write in a manner which is “pegged to the body” (André 2007, p. 29), or expressed “with his guts” (Devaux 2006, p. 11). As Baudouin highlights, this significant emphasis “to wait to feel the subject ‘vibrate’ in you, to see it come to life” (Baudouin 2002, p. 44) emerges from another commonplace in the discourse on creative writing, namely, that of the physiology of style, wherein writing becomes a quasi-biological disposition: “To write as if we breathe in, breathe out the air from our lungs, except that here, words are leaving our mind” (ibid., p. 13). This birth depends on the passage from the inside to the outside and on a rational management of expenditure.

An energetic imaginary emerges, expressed through caloric images such as Devaux’s claim: “Writing is a burning fire that smolders in you” (Devaux 2006, p. 9) as well as Baudouin’s images of expulsion, such as “(w)riting then becomes the channel through which an energy is diffused that only asks to flow, to take shape, to go towards others” (Baudouin 2002, p. 17). Natural phenomena, particularly thermal ones such as fires and volcanoes, are solicited to express the effectiveness and natural issuance of the creative impulse.

Aspiring authors are invited to engage in a process of intimate speleology, by drawing and drilling into the depths of the self. This operation is nothing less than the discovery of a mysterious creative source, by means of an alchemical operation or even “white magic” (André 2007,

p. 78). Indeed, the reiteration of the magical and uncontrollable nature of writing constitutes an insistent line of force in the majority of these literary advice manuals. The expression “to ride the dragon” refers to the Faustian aspects of creation where “writing is white magic, catharsis, intimate voodoo” (ibid., pp. 24, 128). André also metaphorically describes the process of writing in terms of incantation: “You draw the circle of chalk, make the gestures, pronounce the incantations, and the demon you have summoned appears” (ibid., p. 136). As an ancient way of evoking bursts of inspiration, sprouting from an uncharted territory in the mind, these images are used as a way of recalling primitive sources which precede rules and laws. Behind this uncontrollable force in its purest form, then, lies an archaic anarchy and original chaos.

The preface to *L'ABC de l'écrivain* endorses the idea of an exhilarating plunge: something precious lies dormant in each of us. Such drilling metaphors reinforce the idea of tapping into an untamed power where “as soon as we know how to read and write fluently, we just have to abandon ourselves: to our great surprise, the words, which are our history, emerge all on their own” (Stachak 2006, p. 5). Every book is assumed to have deep roots. In the introduction to Eva Kavlan’s *Ecrire et faire écrire*, the injunction “Write!” draws its strength from the illocutionary power of the cry (Kavlan 2018, p. 5). In André’s text, the imperative phrases “Be mad!” and “Let yourself be carried away!” (André 2007, pp. 164, 187) command and compel, turning the military virtues of courage and boldness into forceful motifs.

The creator’s energetic potential is reinforced by a series of techniques including visualization, concentration, and conditioning. This leads to the exploration of a series of adventurous identities, that are in stark contrast to the pervasive motif of the passive writer. Transformed into a skier, marathon runner, or football player, the writer charges himself like a battery through metaphors of virility and vitality, claiming “crafting a book is to writing what marathons are to running” (Baudouin 2002, p. 78). Or similarly: “We believe that writing is a light sport: pen and paper. That is like talking about the footballer – shorts and spiked shoes, a ball – while forgetting that he needs the stadium” (André 2007, p. 108). We find advice insisting upon the necessity of having an alert and balanced body, which then improves performance: “If you can’t find the thread of your speech, leave the table and go for a walk. Alone, of course” (André 2007, p. 139).

Breaking dikes, exploring abysses, opening up to the realm of possibilities: the strength and desire to write resides in the depths of the body, ready to be unleashed. Whatever the end product, the most important thing is to launch the creation machine, to give the endeavor a chivalrous outlook. The manual awakens a buried desire and relies for this on a particular heroic paradigm, namely, that each writer aspires to adventure. The fact that the adventure is an internal one does not erase the physical prospect of willful conquest and action involved. To experience one’s own strength, to make impulse the starting point of writing, is to paint the writer in the manner of a Hernani, as a “force that goes” (Hugo 1830, p. 80).

### *Decor and Characters*

It is important to note that the self-stylization of the writer also implies putting the creative self on display, who is concerned, through rituals and practices, with the gaze of the other. While emphasizing the importance of theatrical figuration, Diaz underlines that “these images do not come alone, but are accompanied by a whole decor and by secondary characters” (Diaz in Amossy and Maingueneau 2009, p. 2). Concomitant to the imaginary writer who is unfolded in the pages of the literary advice manuals, a veritable scenography of space and time emerges. In Baudouin, several pages describe the quest for the most suitable location for creation, directing prospective authors to “locate as precisely as possible, and very concretely, the framework in which your editorial activity will take place” (Baudouin 2002, p. 46).

Even if writing is, as we have seen, born out of an accumulation of forces, these still need to be confined to a private space. Having a room of one’s own becomes a matter of programmatic importance, as Stachak advises: “Dig yourself a little writing nest, just for yourself” (Stachak 2006, p. 6). The importance of withdrawal, studious retreat, and creative isolation are nicely illustrated in *L’ABC de l’écrivain*:

To do this, you must obviously isolate yourself in a calm and comfortable place, where no one will disturb you, a room in your home in which you feel at ease. If you write during the day, soft music of your choice will create an atmosphere conducive to your inspiration. If you write in the evening, in addition to music, subdued lighting, the light of fireplaces



and candles are companions that encourage meditation, as do aquariums.  
(Devaux 2006, p. 11)

Generic choices and creative frameworks complement each other, at times intertwining. Shifts and mimetic exchanges occur between the general framework and the chosen forms. Haikus, for instance, should only be composed in a quiet, even rural place, conducive to the observation of nature, with a notebook in hand. According to Stachak, to be written, poetry must issue from “the center of a sacred space” (Stachak 2006, p. 82). For André, this requires mystical contemplation and a high degree of technique, perhaps facilitated by a space “marked by a circle of chalk within which (one can) only [...] practice alchemical games” (André 2007, p. 105). There is a keen awareness that, in order to access the celestial space of poetry, it is necessary to build “a small temple” and to become one with nature (*ibid.*, p. 106).

A fetishistic attachment to writing tools and to the book as an object is already displayed on the covers of these guides. This paratext is ideally suited to paint a picture of the writer adorned with the symbolic accessories of his profession. Typewriters, pens, fountain pens, inkwells, and notebooks become essential elements of the poetic performance and serve as the mythical backdrop to a labor that is perceived as manual. As such, the smallest objects of everyday life transform into literary and auctorial emblems: a pen, a blank sheet of paper, and the small notebook always carried on oneself, serve as the formal signs of writing as a solitary craft, pursued in a private room with tools at hand. These iconic images of writers also emerge in photographs of authors at their desks.

In addition to these artisanal aspects (set against a backdrop of renunciation of worldly goods), isolation and sacrifice enter the construction of self, required of the apprentice: “If Ponge was satisfied with eight square meters of an old bathroom, you can write as well in a room that is not a work of art” (André 2007, p. 107). Adopting the *posture* of the recluse implies having few social interactions. There are little to no secondary characters in this type of authorial scenario. In *L’ABC de l’écrivain*, collective writing is not recommended because “alone, you remain your own master” (Devaux 2006, p. 14). Letting friends read your manuscript also warrants extreme caution, as one “could receive comments that are sometimes clumsy or thoughtless and could hurt you and demoralize you” (*ibid.*). *Comment écrire votre premier livre* confirms that gregariousness is uncalled for: “These are all challenges to be faced alone, because writing

a book is primarily a matter of the writer. It is only after, later, when the book exists materially, that the gaze of others intervenes and generates, in turn, other uncertainties” (Baudouin 2002, p. 7).

All of these choices have a significant impact. They are, as Bourdieu would say, “as many opportunities to experience or assert one’s position in social space, as a rank to be upheld or a distance to be kept” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 57). They posit the image of a solitary writer who keeps a malicious or censoring audience at bay. The literary advice manuals target students who are already perceived as producing in isolation, cut off from the world (locked in what we could call a “Flaubertian” conception of literature<sup>3</sup>), away from all cultural, political, and social concerns. In so doing, they favor the antisocial nature of writing and the “regime of singularity” (Heinich 2000, p. 26), which privileges all which is unusual, original, and unique.<sup>4</sup> The instructions provided by creative literary advice manuals reflect traditional beliefs about the autonomous nature of the self and the hierarchical nature, centered on the educator, of learning itself. As the prospective author advances in the pedagogical process, the visionary will be transformed into an apprentice.

### THE STUDIOUS APPRENTICE

The dialogue with past authors highlights the need to join a community. Sylvie Ducas notes to what extent “the imperative of singularity inherent in the auctorial *posture* implies being part of the plural of a group” (Ducas 2011, p. 244). The aspiring author must own a library “as if bibliophilia were the best proof of the cult that every writer must dedicate to the book” (Ducas 2002, p. 203). The ideal library, which functions as a center of gravity for the author’s work and provides him/her with spiritual nourishment, is another emblematic sanctuary from which to draw strength and originality: “To create a library, to have the books you have particularly loved close to you, to read them, to reread them, to know certain sentences by heart, is never to be alone and naked in front of the blank page again” (André 2007, pp. 83–84).

Whatever the books, the writer needs to be passionate about them. They function as a “writer’s capital” to which he/she is obliged to refer (Timbal-Duclaux 2009, p. 59). At times, after opening a book, the writer indicates that he starts browsing through it:

Here, for example, I take, at random, from the library a collection of poems by Blaise Cendrars [...] In front of you, I now open the collection and go from page to page, stopping here on a title, wandering there on a line. (Stachak 2006, p. 135)

At other times, however, he goes through it more voraciously, invoking the advice of great author s in formulas charged with intensity: “It suffices to knock at someone’s door, Hemingway, for example, and read his advice to young authors, behold, I was sure of it, even he tells you: ‘Read incessantly’” (André 2007, p. 75). The effects of reading are part of the same magical communion already mentioned: “It is a magical potion [...], it is rediscovering a very ancient ritual that consisted of drinking from the skull of ancestors” (ibid., p. 76). It is partaking in a Golden Age, by evoking a mystical and posthumous communion across centuries through the mediation of the book.

The practice of reading invites us to establish a series of influences: “If you have just discovered Claude Simon, why not attack Proust now, who is so present in Simon’s pages? Roubaud? Or Queneau, for example” (ibid., p. 78). Each budding author is invited to bow before “great ancestors from whom he borrows beliefs, motives, forms and *postures*” (Meizoz 2008, p. 2). For André, again, these authorities go by the names of Georges Perec, Michel Leiris, Pascal Quignard, and Louis Aragon, who are not simply authors, but father figures, representing coded programs. Relay figures, colloquially referred to as “uncles” (to highlight their paternal stature) or “construction workers” (underlining their technique), are deliberately used as reminders of their literary choices, their adopted genres, and the way they imposed their voice (André 2007, pp. 40, 86). They illustrate the importance of providing the novice with structures of identification. At the same time, their conduct embodies a particular mode of being in literature which serves as a touchstone for the apprentice.

Timbal-Duclaux’s work refers to the guardian spirit of Simenon, whom he posits as the model of a writer who is both recognized and popular, therefore managing to reconcile two regimes (the professional and the vocational) of writing. His method, his flash cards, his work rhythm (one chapter a day), and even his way of walking with his nose in the air present themselves as a creative “ready-made”:

This is the technique Simenon himself or herself used when he was ‘hatching’ a Maigret. He went for a walk in the countryside and for a long time took in the fresh air of the trees, flowers, the smell of farms and animals, the smell of the streets, shops, bistros [...] He let his memories of characters and scenes from the past rise inside of him and wrote them down in his mind before returning to his office. [...] Let us add this important detail: during the 15 days he wrote his book, Simenon, who wrote every morning, would start his walk again in the afternoon to revive his memories as his chapters progressed. (Timbal-Duclaux 2009, p. 61)

Literary advice manuals are fond of author biographies and the countless resources and variety of examples that they provide. Taken as a whole, they constitute an anthology of writers’ practices, ranging from working hours, to work sequences, and lifestyle. When matters of filiation and genealogy become core aspects of identity, imitation also becomes an important tool in the identity construction of a writer: “That literary influence or imitation fully partake in identity construction, is proven by the dialectical relationship in which, by copying others, the writer discovers himself and forms his own style” (Ducas 2002, p. 199).

Students of these literary advice manuals are regarded as apprentices of an authority which is entirely constructed on the basis of the names and examples of authors. We have already seen that the quest for the self through books is similar to the search for an intimate truth, but it is also expressed through the respect for genealogy, or filiation, via a chain of authors-fathers. The initial encouragements to write are followed by warnings to temper the visionary power of the creative genius through study, imitation, and frugality. The reckless self-explorer quickly becomes a wise and patient schoolchild. A certain assumption of power takes place, reflected in a “contract” between the apprentice and the guide, who has now become an instructor.

This pact of trust and collaboration, in the form of an apprenticeship contract, stipulates obedience to the rules and is a way of binding oneself to the apprentice. Through this bond, a pact is made between the author of the literary advice manual and the apprentice, wherein the latter vows to become a writer-craftsman who “manufactures” customized literary objects. It is not enough to call oneself a writer; it is also necessary to support this project through an actual investment of time, measured in sacrifices and commitments, combining, as we have seen, a vocational and a professional logic. In *Comment écrire votre premier livre*, each

chapter ends with a rule presented in a box, which recalls the stipulations of a professional contract: “Second rule: At no time, until my book is finished, should I be distracted by another writing subject” (Baudouin 2002, p. 45). The rules are summarized at the end of the book under the title, “Reminder of the fundamental rules of book writing” just before the section “Writers talk about writing,” as if to emphasize the scholastic aspect of the literary advice manual’s teaching method.

In several manuals, exercises are presented as lessons. Discipline, methods, and time-management punctuate the life of the worker-writer. For example, *L’ABC de l’écrivain* is divided into 18 chapters, with titles such as “Your daily writing exercises,” “Different work plans,” and “The organization of your writing work” which are indicative of a methodical logic, measured and counted in steps, at the end of which the writer can obtain recognition (or a virtual diploma) in the form of two “degrees” of either (i) publication or (ii) initiation into a fraternity. As such, if there is one virtue taught by the great ancestors, it is that of diligent work: “writers (and the greater they are, the more this holds true) are driven by an almost soaring desire to work, correct, copy, all of which is exercised despite discomfort or emotional misery” (André 2007, p. 116). Capturing the poetic *furor* in the magic circle is one thing, subordinating the creative project to a clear methodical approach, with a work plan and canvas, is another.

It is implied that those who are rewarded with a publication have systematically followed a pre-determined path. More than merely suggesting rules of conduct, the literary advice manuals suggest rules of life that must be complied with if one wishes to earn the title of “author.” By deeming everyone capable of following an impeccable pre-professional path, the guides assume that every individual acts in a homogeneous, coordinated, and systematic fashion. Not being deemed worthy of the title “author,” then, does not simply imply that one is not able to write well, but also that one is no longer allowed to participate in the literary banquet.

The lessons which are put forward, however, are characterized by the ambiguous desire to reconcile two different and diverging author images: that of the whimsical artist and that of the studious worker. On the side of discipline, Devaux advises: “Whether you write a simple paragraph, a page or more, the essential thing is that you take up your pen every day to perfect yourself and learn to make your ideas, your words and your sentences dance, in order to bring them together” (Devaux 2006,

p. 13). The literary advice manuals are committed to bringing together a solid work effort driven by combining perfecting and learning with the impalpable freedom of inspiration (making ideas dance), which leads to an at times incompatible mix of dedication and liberty. The *posture* of an accountant classifying his records who must “catalog, classify, cut out, enumerate, group, prioritize, number, order, distribute” (André 2007, p. 328) must coexist with the libertarian desires of a free and inspired creator.

### ENTREPRENEUR

Another intellectual classification has now crept into the operation, namely, that of the distinction between the “chosen ones” and the “others.” Aligning oneself with those who identify as writers automatically means distinguishing oneself from those who do not. The very fact of publishing one’s work constitutes a magnificent moment which, according to these literary advice manuals, is both exceptional (as in, rare) and sacred (as in, aspired to): “This sudden recognition has all the appearances of a religious conversion. You receive a call, if not from God himself, then at least from one of his archangels. Clinging to your mobile or land line, you stagger, like Claudel struck by grace next to his pillar [...] you are on a cloud” (André 2007, p. 32).

The sought-after reward is not only a publication as such, but also membership to the “great family of writers” (Devaux 2006, p. 13) which resembles admission to a select circle. The next step consists of initiating the novice into a milieu which not only has its own rules and practices, but also its own secrets. As such, it holds the key to typical constraints, such as knowing how to present your manuscript or how to choose your publisher, as well as the mysteries of publication. The literary advice manuals provide information on how to transition from amateur to professional and put forward the idea of a writers’ corporation as well as that of a commercial enterprise. The writer is transformed into a producer. A more bourgeois way of being emerges, aimed at bringing together a creator, who is taking his first steps into the professional arena, and an already established production circuit. If the book is the product of a self, it is a self shaped according to specific rules, which are those of the market. In literature as well, “(t)he laws of supply and demand apply, as in any industry or trade” (Timbal-Duclaux 2009, p. 150).

While every manuscript inevitably bears the traces of its writer's body, "his flesh and blood" (André 2007, p. 336) the finished product must be impeccably groomed in order to be marketed: "You must not present yourself as a genius, but as a good professional. Use a nice piece of writing paper, send clean, if not impeccable, manuscripts" (Timbal-Duclaux 2009, p. 151). Authors must adopt new postures in this phase: not only do they have to protect themselves from successive rejections by putting up a shield, they also must accept the necessity of positioning themselves in the literary market, by questioning where they will be positioned within that market, and therefore what type of author they will be.

The time has now come to remind the candidate of the reality of the publishing world and its selling imperatives as well as of the strategies the author must deploy to overcome these challenges (e.g., the need to acquire a second profession). In addition to those realistic postures, the manuals also evoke a more rebellious attitude which functions as an expression of the apprentice's authenticity. André acknowledges this, "when you want to write, you don't want to hear this advice, especially if you are under thirty-five years old and are, at the very least, inclined to revolt against the constraints of an 'ordinary' life, that of people who do not write" (André 2007, p. 352). Indeed, an impetuous individual who casts off a docile nature and refuses any compromise could still adopt a noble posture, inspired by a long-standing Romanticist tradition, but this would not be consistent with the desire for economic benefits. This epoch demands a more flexible idea of the writer's status.

This conjunction of a social and institutional inscription (through the figure of the author) with an imaginary world (through the figure of the creator) inevitably creates certain tensions. These dialectical contortions reveal that literary advice manuals are fraught with tension, oscillating between "pantheon and factory" (Ducas 2013, p. 191), professionalization and vocation, bestseller and high literature, routine and adventure. By bringing together "consumption and consecration" (ibid., p. 199), they combine a vocational logic (closely bound to an imperative of singularity) with a professional or even commercial logic, and attempt, with varying degrees of success, to reconcile them.

## CONCLUSION

Like one of the versatile characters from the *Comédie humaine*, the budding writer has to adopt many different faces and must allow different imaginations to coexist. Writers are at the same time the masters of their own imagination, disciples of the great masters of the past, and toys in the hands of publishers, who are subject to the laws of the market. As such, they switch between operations and roles, which they have to acquire through identification. Each context requires its own appropriate *postures* and values, which will be projected in their work, and made visible through the choices they make.

Which traces of the writer can be found in the literary advice manuals, then? The scenographies of the three main “scenes” in which the emergence of the writer-apprentice (the chosen one, the student, and the entrepreneur) play out, put forward three different kinds of representations, which are at times in competition with one another, and at other times, supplementary. Our brief overview of a number of francophone literary advice manuals points toward an image of a sovereign writer, the sole owner of intellectual rights, who composes original, solitary, unique works. The literary advice manuals insist on a single author, a single theme, a single genre, a single theory. The ideal artist must therefore be solitary, possess physical and mental strength, and always keep the company of her intellectual mentors, who abide in an entirely internalized space. A closer look, however, shows that French-language literary advice manuals are fraught with tensions: perpetuating the canon while emphasizing personal practice, they remain heavily invested in a certain mythology of writing, the *furor poeticus* or the magic of creation.

## NOTES

1. Most of the texts in this chapter have not been translated. All translations are by Claire Merrigan, unless otherwise indicated. Like Liesbeth Korthals Altes, we have chosen to maintain Meizoz’s French notion of “posture,” which is most accurately translated as “authorial stance” in most of the text, italicizing it to indicate that it is the French term.
2. The authors selected all combine the unique history of the French literary milieu and the literary models with the relatively recent contribution of the Anglo-Saxon pragmatism/techniques that is dominant in literary advice at present. The authors also hold important positions in creative writing instruction. For instance, Alain André is the founder of Aleph-Ecriture, the



foremost provider of creative writing schools/workshops in France. Similarly, Timbal-Duclaux is a well-respected specialist of popular literary advice manuals.

3. Flaubert is undoubtedly one of the most cited authors in Francophone literary advice manuals. There are, for example, six consecutive quotations from his *Correspondence* in Baudouin's chapter "Les écrivains parlent de l'écriture/Writers talk about their craft" (Baudouin 2002, pp. 180–181). Timbal-Duclaux presents *Madame Bovary* as a novel that "will serve you both as a model and a rival. Analyze Flaubert's technique and position yourself in relationship to him" (Timbal-Duclaux 2009, p. 74).
4. In her research on self-representation and the definition of the writer, Nathalie Heinich distinguishes between two vocational models: the professional, who inscribes himself or herself in a profession and values professional competence, and the vocational. These two registers are expressed through different indicators and linked to two regimes: the regime of singularity (emphasizing originality and singularity) and the regime of community, through which writers ally themselves with the collective good (Heinich 2000, pp. 240, 153).

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# Taking Self-Help Books Seriously: The Informal Aesthetic Education of Writers

*Alexandria Peary*

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the content of self-help literature on writing, one typically omitted in traditional aesthetic education in the verbal arts. The conventional aesthetic training provided in college writing courses—creative writing workshops and to some extent in first-year composition courses, especially ones emphasizing personal essays over research discourse—exposes students to issues of subjectivity, beauty, truth, and emotional and sensory effect through close work with texts. Traditional writing courses, however, lack the sort of autotelic, holistic aesthetic that is advanced in self-help books on how to write. Not simply a package of “how-to” techniques or tips to get published, self-help books provide an experience of art akin to Dewey’s holistic aesthetic experience in which the individual’s qualitative, internal, and everyday lived experiences—“the movement of the organism in its entirety”—are factors (Dewey 1934, pp. 60–61; see also Moroye and Uhrmacher 2009, p. 88). It seems the rarified atmosphere of the classroom tends to preclude this type of creative

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encounter. One way to understand the significance of self-help literature on writing is that it points to the concerns and interests of people outside of schools—ones that have been left unsatisfied or unanswered by traditional schooling.

Historically, significant numbers of people have been drawn to self-education in general and to writing self-education in particular. Self-help books were often bestsellers before “bestseller” was coined; Samuel Smiles’s 1859 *Self-Help: Character and Conduct*, the first to use the term “self-help,” sold 250,000 copies in England. Self-help books that focus on helping people write have frequented bestsellers’ lists (S.n. 2004, p. 86). Since the brunt of people’s lives is spent outside of formal educational settings and since learners are using self-help books to continue their post-graduation aesthetic training, writing educators might want to rethink traditional classroom pedagogy and textbooks. In a nutshell, academia can’t afford to overlook the power of extracurricular aesthetic education since it enjoys considerable popular sway and has the potential to overhaul schooling upon contact.

## THE EXTRACURRICULUM OF WRITING INSTRUCTION

In terms of writing training, two discrete tracks have continuously existed inside the United States, that of classroom-situated instruction and that of informal or extracurricular instruction. Much as the formal curriculum of the university strives to provide instruction for enrolled students, the curriculum of the “extra,” of that which is outside the university, strives to provide a path for people to improve their writing outside of formal coursework. The two chief delivery systems of the extracurriculum are writing self-help books (*Writing Down the Bones* and its ilk) and the writing group (i.e., the gathering of science fiction writers you might see meeting at a coffee shop). The texts created in the extracurriculum are primarily aesthetic, as individuals outside of schools (and working sans an instructor’s assignment) tend toward creative and personal writing, not documented research papers.

The impetus for this informal aesthetic education is suggestive of why scholars should give it more serious consideration. For one, the extracurriculum has frequently served a particular demographic worthy of attention. According to Anne Ruggles Gere, individuals customarily rely on the extracurriculum in response to a lack of educational opportunity due to gendered, geographic, racial, or socioeconomic limitations

(Gere 1994, pp. 72–92). Academic instruction in creative writing has been fraught with problems—including charges of elitism and sexism (Berlin 1987; Haake 2000; Ritter 2007). Secondly, individuals opt for the extracurriculum because of perceived problems with traditional education; this critique of academia should be examined as a sort of macro “student evaluation” of how we’re doing as writing educators. As Susan Miller has argued in *Textual Carnivals*, when the academic discipline of Writing Studies or Composition overlooks the interests of writers, as embodied in the extracurriculum, it has “actually stripped new students and a nation of unschooled potential writers their needs and desires to create significant pieces of writing” (Miller 1991, p. 55). Moreover, academia has repeatedly benefited from contact with the various groups and organizations of the extracurriculum. Historians including Arthur Applebee, Frederick Rudolph, and Gerald Graff documented ways in which nineteenth-century undergraduate nonacademic forums for writing (debating clubs, school literary magazines, literary societies) were absorbed by academia, resulting in such significant developments as the establishment of vernacular literary studies and creative writing (Applebee 1974; see also Graff 1987; Rudolph 1962).

Despite the benefits to formal education, academia has not made optimal use of that other strand of the extracurriculum: self-help literature. Regrettably, Writing Studies has defined itself against self-help discourses that possess considerable leverage with the general public; this othering of popular discourses has helped establish the field as a discipline but also set it up as elitist (Newkirk 2002, p. 28). One example of the potential of self-help to transform aesthetic education of the university is Peter Elbow’s 1973 *Writing Without Teachers*—the first and to-date the only self-help book to be thoroughly embraced by writing instructors and academics. As will be discussed at the end of this article, *Writing Without Teachers* brought a portion of the content of self-help into the forefront of writing education and helped build the process pedagogy movement. Another example of the largely unknown influence of self-help on the formal curriculum is embodied in the history of a single important pedagogical device—freewriting. Process theorist Ken Macrorie is widely identified as the originator of freewriting, but Macrorie has acknowledged that he found the idea in part while attempting to improve his own writing by reading Dorothea Brande’s self-help book, *Becoming a Writer* (Macrorie 1991). However, little subsequent cross-pollination between self-help and the formal curriculum has occurred since Elbow

and Macrorie. A little-known 1994 HarperCollins textbook, Elaine Farris Hughes' *Writing from the Inner Self*, credits Dorothea Brande for some of its ideas (Hughes 1994). More recently, Gesa Kirsch mentions another self-help book, Dan Wakefield's *The Story of Your Life: Writing a Spiritual Autobiography*, as manifesting "several composition scholars' theories of writing development" (Kirsch 2009, pp. W3–W4). By and large, however, academia has ignored the signals sent by the informational writing education that so many people have historically utilized.

### TEACHERS AS OBSTACLES TO WRITING ABILITY

Critique of classroom writing instruction appears in twentieth-century writing self-help literature. In *Becoming a Writer*, Brande claims that most creative writing courses fail to address the "root problems" of writing and instead provide only technical or structural information. Formal classroom instruction becomes a catch-22 situation because such courses help the "hack writer" who is oblivious to the real problems of writing and at the same time just frustrate individuals with genuine talent: "instruction in writing is oftenest aimed at the oblivious tradesman of fiction, and the troubles of the artist are dismissed or overlooked" (Brande [1934] 1981, p. 28). Moreover, writing teachers are unable to help the genuinely struggling student because the teacher is "seldom a practicing author" (*ibid.*, p. 28). In *Writing Down the Bones*, Goldberg claims that formal education failed to help her understand how to become a writer: "I had a sincere and earnest desire to figure out this writing life. I very badly wanted to do it and I didn't know how, and I hadn't learned how in all my public school education. By college, I think I gave up" (Goldberg [1986] 2005, p. xiii). Goldberg proposes that many people who struggle with writing fail to complete the first step of writing—to learn to believe in their own inherent ability—and instead make the mistake of seeking guidance from teachers: "[p]eople often begin writing from a poverty mentality. They are empty and they run to teachers and classes to learn about writing. We learn by doing it. That simple. We don't learn by going outside ourselves to authorities we think know about it" (*ibid.*, 32).

For Ueland, the main issue with formal instruction is how the corrective mindset employed by teachers squelches creativity. Ueland gathers an assembly of negative influences on writing, authority figures who include teachers:

You have all noticed how teachers, critics, parents, and other know-it-alls, when they see you have written something, become at once long-nosed and finicking and go through it gingerly sniffing out the flaws. AHA! a misspelled word! As though Shakespeare could spell! As though spelling, grammar and what you learn in a book about rhetoric has anything to do with freedom and the imagination! (Ueland 1938, p. 59)

This critique is encapsulated in Elbow's title, *Writing Without Teachers*, and in his central contention that people who want to write need to do so by writing without teachers. According to Elbow, people who struggle to write are often stymied by criticism from current teachers or past teachers whom they have internalized. In *Writing Without Teachers*, Elbow also lays significant blame on teachers who he says "seem to play a big role in making it harder for people to write" (Elbow [1973] 1998, p. xii). For Elbow, the tendency in teachers toward a corrective constantly evaluative mindset is one factor in writing blocks.

### ADVOCATING FOR UNIVERSAL WRITING ABILITY

As part of a reparative confidence-building strategy, self-help literature represents writing as a matter of human nature rather than of specialization. Both the desire to write and the ability to write are cast to varying extents as natural. When the act of composing is naturalized, the implication is that writing inhabits a larger environment than only school settings or the charmed realm of published authors. Similarly, Deweyan aesthetics "recontextualizes art as a process within experience" whereby "'Art' ceases to refer to a fixed class of objects or to a detachable essence, and the 'aesthetic' ceases to refer to a peculiar type of subjective experience" (Alexander 1987). Self-help literature also argues against a hierarchy in creative writing instruction. Hughes Mearns, a *protégé* of Dewey and reputed founder of classroom-based creative writing instruction, advocated for a shared human capacity for creativity in his pedagogic and self-help books from the 1920s and 1940s (Myers 1996; See also Mearns 1925; S.n. 1929; S.n. 1940). Despite its early democratization of creative ability, academic-based creative writing instruction slunk into elitism—something avoided by the extracurriculum. Exclusionary practices at Yale and Princeton in the early twentieth century, whereby only so-called gifted students were allowed entrance into creative writing courses, have been criticized by James Berlin ( 1987, pp. 39–40).



Critiques by Katharine Haake and Kelly Ritter of current creative writing education point to the privileging of certain creative writing students, often on the basis of gender or perceived ability (Haake 2000; Ritter 2007).

All the content areas of self-help—the role of the unconscious, control, and holism—gesture to this one message: you can do it. You can write. The ability to write becomes part of every individual’s endowment, an always-present capacity that doesn’t require a classroom or a teacher. Instead, writing ability is extremely portable, part of the self that the writer invariably and easily brings to each new context. Whether that context happens to be part of a classroom or course work—or whether the teacher’s chair is literally vacant—is merely happenstance.

### THE ROLE OF THE UNCONSCIOUS IN WRITING

The trajectory of advice in self-help books on writing can be summarized as occurring in three stages that are for the most part recursively developed. First, the reader is guided through an investigation of his or her writing blocks. The self-help author suggests reasons for the block while at the same time arguing that the reader’s experience of blockage—and of wanting to self-express—is natural to human beings. The net psychological effect of this rhetorical move is to provide comfort to the skeptical and possibly anxious reader, a move Jean Marie Stine and Sandra K. Dolby have described as characteristic of the genre of self-help, no matter the topic of the advice, whether it be quitting smoking, dating, or writing a novel (Stine 1997; See also Dolby 2005). Next, the self-help author assures the reader that he or she possesses an innate ability to write, and that successful composing is a matter of access. Then the self-help author tells readers that they can produce writing by exploring themselves, depicted as an inner space or mind. The message at this point is basically, “Go inward, writer.” Creating becomes a matter of discovery, typically of material already present, albeit unconsciously, in the novice.

In essence, writing self-help books recast the classical rhetorical canon of invention as primarily a matter of self-engagement. This turning inward is described by self-help literature as a matter of the unconscious, as a listening to an inner voice, as discovery, and as one requiring a trusting relationship with the self (in contrast to the distrustful relationship the reader may have with writing experts). The focus on the unconscious or on the interior knowledge of novices also does much to naturalize writing

ability and build self-esteem. In emphasizing the unconscious, the self-help author anticipates the self-doubt of anyone who picks up a self-help book who could be muttering, “Do I *really* have anything in me worth writing?” By suggesting that readers already possess material for writing (in their unconscious), the self-help author has already alleviated the sense that writing is an impossibility. And so Lamott in her best-selling 1995 *Bird by Bird* pronounces:

everything we need in order to tell our stories in a reasonable and exciting way already exists in each of us. Everything you need is in your head and memories, in all that your senses provide, in all that you’ve seen and thought and absorbed. There in your unconscious, where the real creation goes on. (Lamott 1995, p. 181)

In several self-help books on writing, creative ability is also construed as an expansively collective ability, stretching between individuals in a way reminiscent of Jung’s collective unconscious. In her 1986 *Writing Down the Bones*, Natalie Goldberg, citing a Zen master, says that writing “[c]apability is like a water table below the surface of earth’... No one owns it, but you can tap it” (Goldberg 2005, p. 33). When Dorothea Brande in her 1934 *Becoming a Writer* mulls over genius—a topic potentially laden with elitism—she posits genius as a collective and unconscious ability. Creative genius is an endowment that every human being possesses and is at the same time never fully managed by any single person, no matter how great: “No human being is so poor as to have no trace of genius; none so great that he comes within infinity of using his own inheritance to the full” (Brande 1981, p. 157). Our inheritance of genius is not only beyond the manipulation of any single person’s will, according to Brande, it also can’t be altered or consciously taught: “You cannot add one grain to this faculty by all your conscious efforts, but there is no reason you should desire to. Its resources at the feeblest are fuller than you can ever exhaust” (ibid., 156). In this regard, the unconscious as it occurs in writing self-help literature is extracurricular: it is not something impacted or regulated by formal classroom instruction. Similarly, Natalie Goldberg proposes in *Writing Down the Bones* that we need to write from our original minds, a capacity which can be inhibited by analysis as well as by conventional instruction. According to Goldberg, “Stay with your original mind and write from it” (Goldberg 2005, p. 33). School

conversely teaches people to not be attentive to their first thoughts and therefore depletes creativity.

This type of engagement with the unconscious is particularly evident in Dorothea Brande's *If You Want to Write*. For instance, Brande claims that instead of a lack of technique, struggling writers really suffer from "root" personality problems caused by an inability to access the unconscious (Brande 1981, p. 47). These root problems are manifested in the four difficulties commonly displayed by struggling writers: in getting started, in writing again after a previous success, in having too long empty periods between writing, and in producing texts of inconsistent quality (ibid., 47). Rather than attributable to a lack of confidence or excessive expectations, the four root problems result from a failure to access and trust the unconscious. Brande proposes that the novice writer develop a dual nature in which the conscious and unconscious mind are put in dialog: "The writer's first task is to get these two elements of his nature into balance, to combine their aspects into one integrated character. And the first step toward that happy result is to split them apart for consideration and training!" (ibid., 39). In Brande's depiction, one which correlates with a Freudian perspective, the conscious and unconscious work as a team, but the work dynamic is also one in which the two parts regulate each other. So while Brande's first task for the novice writer is that he works on connecting the conscious and unconscious through writing at the moment of waking, the conscious mind also serves as the practical partner and creates "suitable conditions" for the "artistic-self" (ibid., 49). For Brande, as with many of writing self-help authors, the first draft should be a time in which the unconscious is ascendant and the conscious mind, and especially its editorial tendencies, is on mute. At the time of composing, quality was not the correct concern for the writer: the correct goal is to connect the two parts of the mind.

That the unconscious is not within the typical purview of classroom instruction is something that has been discussed by theorists. For instance, both Donald Murray and Janet Emig have suggested that English departments fail to foster the unconscious in student writing. For Murray, writing pedagogy and theory are limited to the "exterior view of writing," overlooking the "interior view of composing seen by the practicing writer" (Murray 1970, p. 21). Adopting this interior view entails an individual exploring her own mind and discovering new material and meaning—a description akin to the unconscious. For Emig in her 1964 article, "The Uses of the Unconscious in Composing," poor student

writing, or “surface scrapings,” results from teaching students only to write consciously or “from one layer of the self” (Emig 1964, p. 6). The sense is that standard writing instruction either is unwilling or unable to help students utilize their unconscious in composing. According to Emig, the very task environment of writing instruction, including the use of weekly themes and in-class writing, is not conducive to “encounters with any but the conscious self” (ibid., p. 6).

The task environment set up by self-help fosters the unconscious in composing in a way which could be of use to writing experts. Students need to be given the rewarding experience of finding ideas in their unconscious—they need to be shown that ideas are not necessarily the derivatives of topic sentences or thesis statements. Imagine a textbook with a focus on showing students how to better access the unconscious in order to write: not just the surface desire of obtaining a good grade. Peter Elbow’s device of freewriting, a widely used pedagogical device, is one method for providing students with stimulating material from the unconscious (Elbow 1998, pp. 17–19). A formal curriculum modeled on the self-help tradition could devote more of its praxis to prompts which enable students to access private imagery and form meaningful connections to the subject matter of an upcoming writing project—even an academic one. For instance, prompts which ask students to generate conceptual metaphors or similes pertaining to a topic at hand and to then reflect on new perspectives cast by those figurative phrases could allow students to connect with the unconscious (Tobin 1989, pp. 444–458).

In her self-help book, Brande offers one such prompt to evoke the conscious and unconscious tango. This marvelously simple demonstration entails drawing a circle on a piece of paper and places a cross through the circle. The reader is then to hold a ring on a string about four inches above the intersection of the cross. Keeping the hand still and trying to ignore the key, the reader is to follow the shape of the circle only with the mind. Soon, the key will be involuntarily making circles in the same direction as the mind had previously gone. Brande suggests then stilling the key and attempting the exercise again, this time moving the mind in the opposite direction in the circle to see if the key will again follow (Brande 1981, pp. 64–65)

This relationship with the unconscious is frequently cast in self-help literature on writing through the metaphor of “voice”: turning inward to create involve listening to and trusting an inner voice. The terms for this “speaking part” given to the unconscious in the performance of writing

differ between self-help books. In *Bird by Bird*, Ann Lamott alternatively calls the unconscious a “voice” and the “intuition.” She advocates creating a metaphor for this voice or intuition which she picturesquely describes: “A friend says that his intuition is his animal: ‘My animal thinks this,’ he says, or ‘My animal hates that.’ But whatever you come up with needs to suggest a voice that you are not trying to control” (Lamott 1995, pp. 114). Lamott describes writing early drafts as listening for voice: “you get quiet and try to hear that still small voice inside” (ibid., p. 110). In *If You Want to Write*, Brenda Ueland equates creativity with introspection and “complete self-trust,” the basic set-up for listening to voice (Ueland 1938, pp. 27–45). Natalie Goldberg extends this discussion of “listening” and equates the entire work of writing with listening to the self (Goldberg 2005, p. 58). Goldberg, like Peter Elbow, maintains that everyone possesses a genuine, interesting voice: “Everything I say as a teacher is ultimately aimed at people trusting their own voice and writing from it” (ibid., p. 165). In *Writing Without Teachers*, voice is equated with the power of an individual’s writing, to be protected from external considerations such as audience and editing:

The habit of compulsive, premature editing doesn’t just make writing hard. It also makes writing dead. Your voice is damped out by all the interruptions, changes, and hesitations between the consciousness and the page. In your natural way of producing words there is a sound, a texture, a rhythm—a voice—which is the main source of power in your writing. (Elbow 1998, p. 6)

According to Elbow, voice is an internal creative capacity—an amazing reservoir of ability—that needs to be accessed and protected in early drafts. Voice became one of Peter Elbow’s signature ideas in the 1970s and 1980s as well as an important construct in academic writing instruction.

## ISSUES OF CONTROL AND CREATIVITY

Imagine an ENL 101 course that includes discussion of how to manage the false tendency to try to control the writing process—or where students go wrong in trying to deal with the constant fluctuation of composing. The paradoxical side to self-help literature is that it often prods readers to renounce control while these very same readers have picked up self-help

books in an attempt to take charge of a certain problematic area of their lives and make a change. As Victoria Leto DeFrancisco describes self-help, it is “do it yourself” repair for the mind, body, and soul” (DeFrancisco 1995, pp. 107–110). Whereas the purpose of scholarly writing is to contribute to one’s field, with self-help, the focus is on the reader as an individual with the intent to aid that individual in his or her daily life (Dolby 2005; See also McGee 2005, p. 195; Starker 1989, p. 9). The very experience of struggling to write or suffering through a writer’s block often leaves individuals feeling out of control. What self-help authors point out, however, is that people who are stuck in their writing often flounder *because* of erroneous attempts at controlling the process.

In Elbow’s *Writing Without Teachers*, control is the umbrella category for several other issues pertaining to blocked writing—self-editing, planning, concern for quality, all of which originate in the conscious mind. In a move that Sandra Dolby describes as characteristic of the self-help genre, Elbow provides autobiographical information on his own struggles with writer’s block. As Dolby says, “One latent function of self-help books is that they provide their authors with an opportunity to bear witness to their own transformation or conversion [...] permit[ing] the unabashed enthusiasm and sense of epiphany the writer is often required to keep subdued in more scholarly writing” (Dolby 2005, p. 48). In his experience attending prestigious ivy-leagues, Oxford and Harvard, much of school instruction was control-oriented and thus caused problems in Elbow’s own writing. From his personal experience overcoming block, Elbow believes that people who want to write need to gain their “independence from care, control, planning, order, steering, trying to get it right, trying to get it good” (Elbow 1998, p. xvii). Throughout *Writing Without Teachers*, the issue of control functions as a way of talking about the differences between the unconscious and conscious parts of the writing mind. Freewriting is the primary strategy for abandoning control and obtaining ideas; in freewriting, “the integration of meanings is at a finer level than you can achieve by conscious planning or arranging” (ibid., p. 8).

Indeed, Elbow seems to redefine the rhetorical canon of invention such that it chiefly entails the relinquishment of control. Elbow relocates control, transporting it from the invention stage to the editing stage, where he says it is more appropriate. Control comes after-the-fact of writing, and the text is heavily planned out only after an initial wandering: “Control, coherence, and knowing your mind are not what you start out

with but what you end up with” (ibid., p. 15). This message is quite a contrast to the “get-your-thinking-right-first-then-write” approach of much writing instruction in the 1960s, epitomized in this advice from a widely used 1965 textbook:

Some people like to take aimless trips, making no plans at all but rambling over the countryside, exploring side roads, stopping when they wish, and not much caring when or where they arrive. When people want to reach a definite destination at a specific time, however, they generally make detailed plans of their route and schedule their time. Writing is much the same. Some writing – letters to friends, for example – is unplanned. It rambles on aimlessly and spontaneously, making digressions and having no fixed objective. For most formal writing, however, you need a plan which shows you where you are headed and how you expect to get there. (Newkirk 2005)

Meaning-making is unconscious in that the individual may not have been aware of this content present in his or her thoughts before writing—and may not be aware of this content even while writing or dredging them up. Another aspect of this abandonment of control is allowing the words to guide one’s meaning, rather than thinking that either the unconscious or conscious self is the stalwart leader through the act of composition: “You’re trying to get your material to do some of the steering instead of doing it all yourself... The words are not going through stages you planned or that you control” (Elbow 1998, p. 32). This abandonment of control as advocated by the extracurriculum corresponds with the “special scope of aesthetic experience” described by Martin Seel, in which “aesthetic experience allows what is indeterminate in the determinate,” increasing a viewer’s awareness of the present moment (Seel 2009, p. 105). Elbow claims that, paradoxically, when a writer tries to be in charge, she frequently ends up stuck, helpless, and feeling that writing is beyond her (Elbow 1998, p. 32). For Elbow, the site of invention is not just about making an inward turn: it’s also about monitoring how the self-responds to control and discouraging the self from falsely seeking control.

In a different way of addressing issues of control, Dorothea Brande and Ann Lamott both speak of writing as entering a state of self-hypnosis—the epitome of losing control. When Brande actually broaches the thorny topic of genius, she discusses it as a lack of control, as entering a state of light hypnosis in which “the attention is held, but *just* held” (Brande

1981, p. 160). While mindless or repetitive activities like cleaning floors can help some individuals reach genius, Brande says the more efficient method is to quiet the mind through meditation on an object. After quieting the endless discursive thinking, the writer should introduce an idea from their writing and see what arises (*ibid.*, p. 164). For Lamott, “Writing is about hypnotizing yourself into believing in yourself, getting some work done, then unhypnotizing yourself and going over the material coldly” (Lamott 1995, p. 114). In Goldberg’s book, the mindfulness and Buddhist philosophies which pervade *Writing Down the Bones* obviate the need for explicit discussion of self-hypnosis. Mindfulness is similar to self-hypnosis in its calming of the self and watchfulness of mental phenomena.

A synthesis of self-help and formal writing pedagogy for the purposes of teaching students issues of control would entail drawing students’ awareness, through process writing and class discussion, to their own stance toward critique and error. Another method could involve asking students to write a significant quantity of non-graded writing so that error, dull thinking, or flat language become a small, passing matter rather than a worrisome condition. By prolonging the invention phase, assigning more private writing, and allowing students to delay performing for an audience for as long as each individual requires, students can be guided toward a more helpful sense of control.

### THE HOLISTIC NATURE OF WRITING

Overall, writing self-help books propose that writing is a holistic act involving and affecting the entire person not to be compartmentalized as solely a mental phenomenon. As Richard Shusterman has said of Dewey, self-help books cast the experience of writing as naturalistic, as “grounding aesthetics in the natural needs, constitution and activities of the embodied human organism” (Shusterman 2001, p. 122). Dewey endeavored to reduce unhelpful binaries between the mind and body and between affect and logic (Dewey 1929, pp. 63–72). In self-help literature, this holistic outlook sees writing as offering intrinsic benefits beyond publication or other types of external success. Perhaps intrinsic rewards are needed because of the way in which self-help literature necessarily positions the act of writing. That is, any writing completed through the advice of a self-help book is writing that has been done outside of academia. In school settings, a theoretically clear outcome is



promised at the finishing line of writing—grade, passing course, graduation, degree, employment—whereas in the extracurriculum, excepting publication, goals may be less clear cut. Thus, for Brande, the central task of learning to write, namely the synchronizing of the unconscious and conscious, is fundamentally holistic. It takes the whole person to let the two parts of the self make good writing decisions (Brande 1981, p. 45). The reader should keep in mind the benefit of trying her exercises which have as their “end of making a full and effective life for yourself” (ibid., p. 66). In *Writing Without Teachers*, Elbow links composing with “any learning that involves the whole person rather than some discrete cognitive skill” (Elbow 1998, p. 141).

Personal fulfillment, spiritual and societal benefits, and identity formation are all touted by self-help authors as the benefits of practicing one’s writing—again surpassing any discrete cognitive skill. Writing can positively affect as well as involve the whole person; rather than an occasion for anxiety, writing is an all-around pleasant opportunity for connecting to oneself. In this regard, self-help aesthetics correspond with Dewey’s stance that an aesthetic experience is “appreciative, perceiving, and enjoying” (Whitehead 2004). This sort of holism is evident in Composition scholar Sondra Perl’s adaptation of Eugene Gendlin’s theory of felt sense—in which having a creative experience is noted not only in the mind but also in the body (Perl 2004). It’s also evident in Richard Shusterman’s more recent concept of somaesthetics which builds off of Dewey’s naturalism and which identifies the body as a source for aesthetic experience (Shusterman 2008). A writing course which adopts the holistic stance of self-help would endeavor to help students connect the act of composing to experiences in their bodies and to experiences outside the classroom in their everyday lives. While not necessarily inviting first-person pronoun texts, meta-cognitive prompts (such as asking students to insert parentheticals inside an early draft in which they reflect on what is occurring with themselves or their surroundings in the moment of writing) is one exercise to increase students’ holistic sense of themselves as writers.

Self-help literature offers models for how to proceed with that holistic stance for writing. In *Bird by Bird*, Ann Lamott perceives writing as leading to personal fulfillment when a writer feels that “true words” have moved from inside them to the external world (Lamott 1995, p. xxxxi). Lamott also says writing can ameliorate the problems of the modern world, suggesting that writing can be a cure for narcissism by providing states of ecstasy and self-respect (ibid., pp. 99–100). Lamott concludes

*Bird by Bird* with the notion that writers belong to a noble tradition in an imperfect world; writing deepens the soul and helps counter the absurdity of contemporary life (ibid., pp. 234–237). For Goldberg in *Writing Down the Bones*, the writing practice carries spiritual benefits, allowing a person to “become larger” than herself by following her instinctive thoughts and be “breathing in God” (Goldberg 2005, p. 10). Furthermore, writing provides satisfaction because it indicates that the individual is “fulfilling your function” by “knowing who you are, what you are supposed to be doing on this earth, and then simply doing it” (ibid., p. 44). Writing leads to a greater awareness which Goldberg calls “living twice,” and literacy in general is a “constant source of life and vitality,” exemplified in the Jewish tradition of giving a boy a spoon of honey after he reads his first word from the Torah (ibid., p. 53, 119). Goldberg finally sums up her esteem for the benefits of writing when she tells the reader not to worry about the quality of created texts but instead to know that the very attempt to write is “heaven” (ibid., p. 119). In a similar emphatic vein, Ueland in *If You Want to Write* touts the health benefits of creativity in a way which would likely not be found in a composition-rhetoric textbook, no matter the time period:

Writing, the creative effort, the use of the imagination, should come first—at least for some part of every day of your life. It is a wonderful blessing if you will use it. You will become happier, more enlightened, alive, impassioned, lighthearted, and generous to everybody else. Even your health will improve. Colds will disappear and all the other ailments of discouragement and boredom. (Ueland 1938, p. 13)

For Ueland, writing is never a waste of time, and even on the sentence level, the act of composition will benefit the individual (ibid., p. 14). Writing is such a holistic endeavor that it can positively and physically affect the writer’s health in Ueland’s scenario.

Self-help authors’ emphasis on the intrinsic benefits to writing also entail their devaluation of publication. That self-help books on writing do not promise readers publication contradicts skepticism of self-help authors, as expressed by Tom Tiede and Wendy Kaminer, as snake oil salespeople who promise easy fixes and immediate gratification and cause conformity (Tiede 2001; See also Kaminer 1992). In fact, Lamott, Goldberg, and Ueland actively downplay publication, even suggesting that

their stronger writing students are the ones who haven't sought publication. For Ueland in *If You Want to Write*, her published students are often the least interesting to her, and she frequently points out the superiority of unschooled student writing to that receiving acclaim in the mainstream magazines of the day. Ueland describes publication as one of the impediments to her own writing (Ueland 1938, p. 21). Overall, the benefits espoused in self-help literature on writing are more substantive than external rewards, and thus the self-help reader is provided multiple motivations for the hard work of writing self-education.

Connected to the intrinsic rewards of writing in self-help literature is the related notion that writing needs to be perceived as a long-term endeavor that requires daily practice. Simply put, writing requires a different timeline than one normally seen in a classroom. This developmental model makes sense given the context of self-help: it's learning that is not part of a fifteen-week course with clear tasks and provided deadlines. In Elbow's view, working on one's writing is not about an assignment immediately at hand but about improving writing for and in the future: "But you must develop a feel for the larger growth cycles too. Certain kinds of growth take longer. One has to be open and accept bad writing now—meaning this year, this decade—in order to get to good writing" (Elbow 1998, p. 47). In a similar vein, Anne Lamott suggests that one solution for a writer's block is to take a long-term view of writing by relinquishing control and patiently waiting for one's intuitive inner voice to kick in again (*ibid.*, pp. 112–113).

Writing self-help authors frequently recommend a daily practice for writing. Not only does writing take the patience to continue with it beyond the span of a semester or course, it also requires a higher frequency of engagement than school-based writing. That is, people who want to write must do so every day, not on the days a class meets. Lamott suggests that the solution to writing problems is two-fold: develop a daily practice and lower standards (Lamott 1995, p. 22). Brande's daily schedule entails early morning freewriting to tap the unconscious, writing at a set time each day, and then once ease has been established, writing at a varied time in order to "teach yourself to write at a given moment" (Brande 1981, p. 76). In *If You Want to Write*, Ueland's daily practice differs from Brande's in that it emphasizes a purposeful idleness to jump-start creativity (Ueland 1938, pp. 35–36). Formal writing instruction could coach students toward adopting a long-term view of their writing development—in which students are committed to growing as users

of language beyond the fifteen weeks of a compartmentalized course. For example, designing major course projects that emphasize unfinished (versus polished) long texts would help instructors steer students away from artificial semester deadlines and toward a long-term view of their productions. Such projects allow students to concentrate on generating multiple new ideas rather than weeding them out—with the implication that the ideas are a resource for future written projects.

### ELBOW'S *WRITING WITHOUT TEACHERS*: THE INFORMAL AFFECTING THE FORMAL IN AESTHETIC EDUCATION

While Lamott's *Bird by Bird* and Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones*—and likely still Ueland's book from the 1930s—make it often to the departmental copy machine, face-down, for handouts for students, Elbow's book was the first self-help book on writing to fully pervade classroom writing instruction—and no other self-help book has done so since. *Writing Without Teachers*, undoubtedly one of the most influential of texts on the academic discipline of Composition Studies, paradoxically began as a self-help book. Elbow started the book as a series of private notes to help himself out of his own entrenched writer's block in graduate school (Elbow 2009). Elbow based his title off a self-education series popular in England in the 1960s with titles like *Latin without Tears* (ibid.). Sandra K. Dolby identifies the tendency of self-help authors to “bear witness to their own transformation or conversion” in relation to a personal challenge (Dolby 2005; See also Lee 2007; Woodstock 2006). In a similar vein, Elbow has described *Writing Without Teachers* as evangelical: “I didn't think of *Writing Without Teachers* as scholarly. I thought of it as ‘I have the truth to tell everyone.’... I wanted to stand on a mountain top and tell people how they can [write]” (Elbow 2009). The self-help stance of Elbow's book is evident starting with its title—and the paradox is that *Writing Without Teachers* and then his subsequent *Writing with Power* went on to become widely used by teachers in classrooms.

What differentiates Elbow's advice from those of the other self-help books is its systematic presentation on how to go about the work of writing. In part, Elbow's different presentation may result from the fact that he is and was a faculty member in high education, unlike the other self-help authors. By the time he organized the original scraps for a book-length treatment in *Writing Without Teachers*, Elbow had completed a Ph.D. from Brandeis, had taught at M.I.T., and had helped establish an

entire college (the now-defunct Franconia College). Ueland, Lamott, and Goldberg provide anecdotes of their strategies as a model for the reader or serve as a sort of commonplace book for short sound bites on writing. What they do not provide is a systematic treatment from inception to final draft. A novice who wanted to parse out a thorough composing practice for herself from these other books would have to do a great deal of work to fill in gaps; she'd practically be writing her own syllabus. One problem with self-help literature is that it is largely constructed on authors' personal accounts of struggle, thereby tacitly suggesting that the reader adopt the ways of the author/authority in the absence of empirical evidence (Lee 2007; Woodstock 2006). Another criticism of self-help books is that in their desire to assist struggling writers, self-help authors deaden reader's critical thinking capacity by providing "simple, step-by-step solutions to whatever crisis they discuss" (Kaminer 1992). Finally, self-help books tend toward the affective—using encouragement, direct address of the reader, and pathos rather than the more even-handed qualifiers of academic scholarship—and therefore may seem suspect to academic writing specialists. Elbow's work has faced critiques similar to those of self-help. As Kia Richmond and Irene Papoulis have suggested, Elbow's work has also been criticized for its subjective treatment of composition and for drawing attention to the affective dimensions of learning (Richmond 2002; see also Papoulis 2002). Specifically, Elbow's promotion of voice has been described as imparting Writing Studies with an anti-intellectual evangelicalism in which students gain a metaphoric salvation if their writing is subjectively deemed by their teachers to contain voice (Hashimoto 1994).

Given these criticisms, one could say that Elbow is just "teacherly enough" to take his teacherless approach and infuse it with an organization. That is, Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* has just the right amount of "curriculum" in order to make his extracurriculum convincing. After initially vocalizing his grievance with traditional writing instruction, Elbow rolls out complex composing strategies—freewriting, then the Growing Process, followed by the Cooking Process. In addition to the composing strategies, Elbow provides advice on revision and then obtaining feedback (through a teacherless group). In *Writing Groups*, Gere comments upon the remarkable information Elbow also provides to extracurricular readers on how to create a teacherless writing group: "Elbow includes suggestions on qualities to seek in group members, procedures for running the 'class,' and difficulties to avoid... In other

words, Elbow provides a ‘kit’ for persons wishing to establish their own writing groups” (Gere 1987, p. 49). The different strategies Elbow detailed for building a teacherless writing class grew from self-help notions of the unconscious and holistic dimensions of writing.

Elbow’s strategies were adopted in the 1970s and 1980s by writing scholars into an array of teaching practices ubiquitous to current college and university writing programs: breaking students into feedback groups, developing rough and early drafts, freewriting, and writing to self-express. These days, you would be hard-pressed to find a writing instructor who has not in some way been exposed to the self-help ideas of Elbow’s early book. Indeed, Elbow’s extracurricular ideas about writing became foundational to process pedagogy—a whole branch of teaching and theory which in turn helped establish Composition Studies as an academic discipline in the university (Crowley 1998; see also Connors 2003). Elbow’s book and the process movement are frequently described as causing a whole paradigm shift in writing education and as energizing scholars to teach in whole new student-centered ways that fostered more lively and expressive writing in students (Hairston 1982; See also Freisinger 1994). *Writing Without Teachers* has functioned as writing scholars’ self-help reading, much like a person with relationship woes might pick up *Men are From Mars, Women from Venus*. In the mid-1970s, writing faculty were dissatisfied with conventional classroom procedure which involved little student writing, much lecture, and a great deal of lifeless writing in response to rote tasks (Enos 2010). Needing help, wanting to fix their own teaching practices, instructors readily picked up and read *Writing Without Teachers* as a self-help book.

## CONCLUSION

By providing an alternative to classroom writing education, self-help books have given countless individuals the opportunity for a Deweyan encounter with their own creative texts. As such, self-help books, far from commercial fluff, are powerful egalitarian forces, allowing all sorts of people—not only students, teachers, or professional authors—to learn about the art of writing on their own time, separate from a teacher, an assignment, or a grade. In positing that everyone has the ability to write, self-help books provide an affirmative learning environment to counteract negative messages about writing sometimes arising from years of classroom instruction. More importantly, the general public’s interest in the

content of self-help books on writing suggests a need for such content in the textbooks and instruction of formal aesthetic education. Taken seriously, self-help literature on writing not only has much to offer the general public and prospective authors in terms of education: it has much to offer those of us who are invested in providing a highly effective—and indeed affective—classroom learning experience.

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## A Pulse Before Shelf Life: Literary Advice on Notebook-Writing as Event

*Arne Vanraes*

What if the book with all its wiles and daring were only mad resistance against the emptiness of the last page? (Jabès 1991, p. 205).

It belongs to the goodness of the world, that its settled order should deal tenderly with the faint discordant light of the dawn of another age (Whitehead 1978, p. 339).

### INTRODUCTION

The notebook is a tool entangled with the roots of creative writing pedagogy and is a time-honored component in the culture of literary advice that intends to guide the aspirant author in coming-to-writing. Already in one of the earliest examples of western writing advice, “The Art of Fiction” discussion between Sir Walter Besant and Henry James (1884), Besant encouraged the method of consistent note-keeping and claimed that “(t)he learner must carry his note-book always with him”

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(Besant and James 1884, p. 21). With his stress on systematically implementing the notebook as the student's attribute, he expressed his concern for wanting to jump to the polished literary product prematurely. The "elements of Art" (ibid., pp. 21–22) are acquired in the experiential encounters with one's environment and in the preliminary practice and study of composing these experiences into the text. Yet, Besant is equally adamant in his later book of instruction, *The Pen and the Book* [1899], that "the desire alone" is not enough, and that the student must write "Something"—and with mastery (Besant 2012, pp. 5, 49). Thus, we are confronted early on with the issue that, for all its radically open-ended qualities, the notebook as such can seem at odds with a pedagogical project of formulating specific and practical advice on the inflection point where writing *tout court* determines some order for the attainment of an end and may be offered up for evaluation. While agreeing with Besant's insistence on taking notes, Henry James is explicit at his turn in the debate when he remarks the lack of precision regarding *what* goes into the notebook: "But this I fear (the novelist) can never learn in any hand-book; it is the business of his life" (Besant and James 1884, p. 67).

How curious, then, that a century after these early examples of western writing advice, this is precisely what began to surface: instructive documents and handbooks specifically dedicated to keeping a notebook or writer's journal. Virtually all the classics of twentieth-century literary advice consistently place great value on the practice (e.g., Dorothea Brande, Brenda Ueland, Natalie Goldberg, Julia Cameron, Peter Elbow), but since the mid-1990s examples started to emerge among North-American publications where the notebook takes center stage. In this essay, I will discuss two more conventional handbooks, Ralph Fletcher's *Breathing In, Breathing Out. Keeping a Writer's Notebook* (1996)<sup>1</sup> and Aimee Buckner's *Notebook Know-How. Strategies for the Writer's Notebook* (2005), and three compilations of writers' testimonies on their own praxes of note-taking which carry an instructional intent, *The Writer's Notebook*, edited by Howard Junker (1995), *The Writer's Journal. 40 Contemporary Authors and Their Journals*, edited by Sheila Bender (1997), and *Writers and their Notebooks*, edited by Diana Raab (2010).

My focus is their process-pedagogical approach to the notebook and how it functions as a lure for linking up the ingredient elements of the event of writing into some concrete unity—the problematic determinacy of writing "something" Besant and James already addressed. How could

one conceive of a writing ahead of its occurrence? How to anticipate writing's definition before the singularity that distinguishes the event of its coming-to-be? And what with the imperative of finishing, when every instant of writing's satisfaction becomes a condition for the event to advance beyond this determination?

### END-LESS WRITING: WRITING'S EVENT

Henry James's early critical remark about the notebook's indefinable contents already intimates the absence of any single imitable template that would dictate pedagogical formulas. Anything goes. Records of observations and copies of things read, impressions remembered and traps set against oblivion, lists for coherence and musings to gain understanding, the urgent notice of a sudden revelation or a fleeting dream, secrets saved from the public eye, stock taken for the work of art underway, and so on. Additionally, the variety of authors writing reflective pieces on their note-taking praxes compiled by Howard Junker, Sheila Bender, and Diana Raab illustrates the wide range of textual modes and poietic forms that may emerge from them: novels, poetry, short stories, memoirs, criticism, etc. Howard Junker maintains: "Anything can be tried because nothing is at stake. No one is watching: there is no script, as there is in a rehearsal, to obey" (Junker 1995, p. 2).<sup>2</sup> One finds that notebooks as a whole share few elements between them that could conveniently be generically coded or standardized by literary institutions. They cannot easily be made intelligible or be evaluated by how closely they resemble a group of other texts that adhere as a genre. Therefore, whenever the guidebooks approach note-taking-in-itself and initially set out to explain *what it is*, they perform a different function from the genre-normative one that has been observed in literary advice on, for instance, the American short story (Levy 1993), the popular romance novel (De Geest and Goris 2010), or mystery fiction (Masschelein and de Geest 2017). Early on, the issue presents itself of how we can address Creative Writing's foundational question: "Can it be taught?" when there seems to be no *it* to teach?

In search of some unifying determinant among notebooks, we might consider the private diary, to which they are positioned in ambiguous proximity. Due to their common instrumentality and the open-endedness of the notebook, the advice books will sometimes cover both forms interchangeably when discussing the "writer's journal." Yet there are many advice authors, too, who note vital differences between them. One

common claim for their distinctions is that the notebook, unlike the diary, is somehow *more* than the factual accounting of the day's proceedings (a point also made in Joan Didion's well-known essay *On Keeping a Notebook* [1968] and Michael Taussig's extraordinary notebook study *I Swear I Saw This* [2011]). It lends itself to the surplus of "inner life" and "sensory detail" (Denise Levertov in Bender 1997, p. 185), the deeper "emotional landscape" of experience (Fletcher 1996, p. 47), the crisis-driven "journey" beyond the day's matter-of-factness (Maureen Stanton in Raab 2010, p. 72), and it has a broader scope than diarists' "fascination with their own lives" (Robin Hemley in Bender 1997, p. 121 and in Raab 2010, pp. 17–18). Moreover, Aimee Buckner argues that the diary is an "end" in itself (Buckner 2005, p. 35), which contrasts with Marianna de Marco Torgovnick's claim of the notebook as a space for "working" (in Bender 1997, p. 295). In short, the notebook is too committed to supplemental processes and transitional potentialities to easily be considered an end in itself.

Howard Junker's terminology is telling when he calls notebooks a niche among "preliterary" or "subliterary genres" (Junker 1995, p. 2) in the context of creative writing, which neighbors the blanket concept of "prewriting" frequently used in writing pedagogy to cover note-taking. Such terms are suggestive of how strongly preconceptions about creative writing are implied in the prospect of the work of art and expectations of writerly ambition tied to publication and profession. The writer's notebook as a typically private, unpublished and transformational process-document can elude these associations. It embodies perhaps what Graeme Harper names the "acts and actions" of creative writing, as opposed to the cultural and commercial "commodity value" of finished works (Harper 2010). The creative work exists, as well, in the lot of its pre- and post-working—spadework, most of which is rarely published—and in the participation of gestures that are always already more than the completed work to begin with. Hence, Harper imagines a more liberal use of the "creative writer" label that is radical and simple: "To continue to be a creative writer someone must be writing, creatively," and holds that "*Creative Writing doesn't begin at the point at which a creative writer ceases to do it*" (ibid., pp. 8, 27; original emphasis). An irony of the literary advice industry is that it carves out a segment from the consumer market where it commodifies the acts and actions of creative writing. The operations formative of the creative artifact begin to supplement it as a

commodity and few kinds of writing enable this better than the so-called preliterary genre of note-taking.

So, if the notebook is not an end in itself, then is it a *means* to an end, if we take that to signify a pure implement of design? Not quite. The notebook advice typically does not predefine an eventual formative outcome, for example in the form of a composed and codified work aimed at public consumption. Instead, it takes on an intensely process-pedagogical approach and joins in its freewriting methodologies. When Diana Raab states in an appendix to her compilation that “There are as many ways to journal and use journal entries as there are ways to write” (in Raab 2010, p. 191), she is essentially implying that the principle ordering element that may be abstracted from the writer’s notebook is *writing* as such. The intention proclaimed by the notebook-guidebooks is then very often to get students writing at all. Ralph Fletcher is emphatic: “The point of a writer’s notebook is nothing more nor less than writing—first person and intimate, sincere or experimental—on a regular basis” (Fletcher 1996, p. 94). Likewise, Aimee Buckner maintains that “the most important aspect of a notebook is that it allows students the practice of simply writing [...] in whatever form. Writing, writing, writing” (Buckner 2005, p. 7), and Dorianne Laux promotes: “Journaling. All the time. Write, write, write” (in Raab 2010, p. 149). While there are still signals to be found that the composition of a work for publication is likely the writer’s eventual desire, this “glory of glories,” as Katherine Towler calls it (in *ibid.*, p. 36), is purposely postponed and the “use value” of the student’s notebook is not instantly measured against it. Instead, an act of writing is encouraged whose creative expanse outreaches its imagined fulfillment. Robin Hemley observes: “this is often when I write my best work, when I’m not trying too hard to make *Art*” (in *ibid.*, p. 18; original emphasis). Similarly, Gary Snyder advocates “no special literary pretension, and no obligation to “make use” of any of it” (in Junker 1995, p. 203), and for Elizabeth Woodly, the notebook “is a release from deeper obligations, of attempts to write in a ‘higher language’” (in Bender 1997, p. 326).

In other words, in their suggestions for how students should first approach their notebooks, these guidebooks invite a kind of *end-less* writing: a creative activity that survives both its predefinition and its termination. It endures as it differentiates and is differentiated by any temporary attainment of purpose and thus baffles the imperative to finish. This end-less writing is relevant to that which Roland Barthes called writing as an “intransitive verb” or writing “in the absolute sense,” whose

“tending-toward” matters more than its direct object, its “something” (Barthes 2011, pp. 14, 141, 144–148). Given the firm associations of creative writing with generic codes and the myth of the finished, public Work, this interpretation of a “writing for writing’s sake” could easily be caricatured as writing *no-thing-at-all*, which risks reducing the notebook to a hollow index, turning note-taking purely gestural and making the writerly position no more than postural. As an analog technology that is shared in intimately physical social environments, the notebook permits such enactment comfortably, as Omar S. Castañeda illustrates: “It seems such a sign of a writer that it is the most efficient way for those nonwriters in coffee shops to keep alive their highly visible pretense of ambition” (in Bender 1997, p. 42).

End-less writing, however, is of course not devoid of objects altogether, but indulges rather in the abundance and impermanence of writing’s potential inclinations, its uncertain tending-toward and pointing-beyond. This is part of the reason why the notebook inspires a legitimately egalitarian view on the activity of writing and why it is so attractive to the dilettante. It helps remind us that even those celebrated authors who *did* end up composing their writing into some satisfied unity, decided to offer it up for publication and eventually gained acclaim with it, have witnessed their own end-less initiations, often in their own unspectacular notebooks. Howard Junker articulates it effectively: “To writers, at every career stage, our notebooks offer, I think, a kind of ultimate, reverse inspiration: ‘Look how ordinary, how lost and styleless – and how courageous – a great writer can be. Just like me’” (in Junker 1995, p. 4).<sup>3</sup> The notebook, by the indeterminacy of its end-less writing, draws “master” and “amateur” into a common field of activity—a potentiality of passage that neither coincides with mock-creativity nor with the guarantee that everyone *de facto* is a successful professional author in-waiting.

The approach of a kind of “writing for writing’s sake” is not a novelty introduced by the notebook-guidebooks alone, but is frequently encountered in the lore of twentieth-century literary advice. Alexandria Peary’s study of self-help books for creative writing, for instance, observes in the classics a general “devaluation of publication,” by “prolonging the invention phase, assigning more private writing, and allowing students to delay performing for an audience for as long as each individual requires” (see Peary in this book). Precisely this advocacy has served as ground for other scholars, creative writers, and critics to oppose the literary advice culture in the past, as it seems to jeopardize the notion of creative writing as a



specialized “craft” and undermine the import of the literary profession and its commodities.

In one example, Steve Westbrook dismisses how “we find it perfectly normal to teach students the craft of creative writing by offering them this advice on a regular basis: generate text for the purpose of simply generating text” (Westbrook 2004, p. 143). It is an “illusion of purposeless writing” (*ibid.*), he claims, that dissuades students from motivating their writing by political engagement and the drive of cultural activism. This ambition of a more reactionary project, combined once more with an implicit evaluation of creative writing by its commodities, however, is arguably an utterly particular preconception of writing’s objects and objectives—admirable, perhaps, but contingent nonetheless. The prejudice makes the criticism of the “just do *it*” mentality within literary advice (*ibid.*, pp. 144–147; emphasis added), somewhat contrived and difficult to extrapolate to the notebook-guidebooks, since their focal point is so often the creative advance of writing’s activity beyond any presupposed or objectified actualization. Westbrook does briefly concede that the freewriting advice is perhaps harmless for undergraduates, but I believe John Milne’s point about writerly ambition is more succinct when he declares: “Wanting to write and wanting to be a writer are different things. You become a writer because you write, not vice versa” (Milne 2014, p. 404).

Milne’s remark, to my mind, pricks the heart of the matter. A part must be reserved for every creative activity where artists do not fully perceive its materials assembled as concrete entities in advance but only witness this coming-together in the movement of a process-already-underway as it culminates in experience. A process can only be surveyed as teleological once it has been satisfied; the end is always already lodged in the past. There is a degree of suspenseful uncertainty where you don’t know exactly “what” to write before its being-written has already begun. James Brown believes in a similar sense that “you discover what it is you want to say during the writing process” (in Raab 2010, p. 3), a point echoed more aphoristically by John DuFresne: “Writing engenders more writing” (*ibid.*, p. 113), and Dorianne Laux: “Writing begets writing” (in Junker 1995, p. 169). The uncodified notebook amplifies such a self-propelling and self-positing kind of creation. It is an instrument of its own becoming; a shared name for both a technology and the impermanent body of instabilities that form its product-in-the-making.

I would like to take John DuFresne's contention that "The notebook is not an end, but a means" (in Raab 2010, p. 114), to a further extreme and propose with some overemphasis that it can function as a means *without* an end. The notebook encourages an activity of end-less writing that behaves as a "mediality" or "in-betweenness" which produces objective unity again and again through the incidents of its own middling. This intermediary position between the discrete stabilities of writing *something* reveals a fault where the criticism of a "just do it" attitude is projected onto writing for writing's sake. It also begs some nuance as to how we have referred to the "acts and actions" of creative writing, accentuated early on in Aimee Buckner's handbook as well: "It's the *act* of writing – the practice of generating text and building fluency – that leads writers to significance" (Buckner 2005, p. 7; original emphasis). You cannot exactly claim to "*do* it," because this *it* is never fully established ahead of its occurrence. You could not consider notebook writing as a means to an end within the instability of its coming-to-be, since this or that eventual end is not successfully defined before the actual fulfillment of writing's middling. *It* cannot be done. An end-less writing, rather than as an act, should really be considered in terms of its *event*—a happening, self-creative interval which relates and requalifies the materials fed into it and is never entirely in sync with the artist's sovereign intentions or a fact of mere execution. How this interval can yet be fed by the artist, how the event can be induced, will form the topic of the coming discussion.

We asked with Besant and James whether the "it" of notebook writing "can be taught." An awareness that goal-oriented writing refrains with interstices where the materials of writing self-create their togetherness and exceed the writer's expectations entails that the event of writing invents a part of its own pedagogical needs in the process of its happening. The notebook-guidebooks are compelling in their *uselessness*. It is only obvious to condemn the perceived inconsequentiality of advice such as "don't try too hard to make Art," or "just write for writing's sake," if one already presumes to know beforehand what writing is supposed to amount to, regardless of whether or not that aim is worthy of aspiration. The pedagogical project I gather from the notebook guidebooks is one that, rather than *instructing*, *facilitates* the creativity of learning in every project-in-the-making; privileging *making* sense over accepting *common* sense.<sup>4</sup> All writing efforts, regardless of skill and intent, at every stage, spill constantly into and out of self-organizing intervals, pulsing between the writer's

initiations and experiences, and the materials' tendencies and limitations. One's end is the event's beginning, like a throbbing heartbeat of creation.

### GIFTED: CREATIVE RECEPTIVITY

The singer-songwriter Townes Van Zandt said of his song *Mr. Mudd and Mr. Gold*: "That song came to me in a flash, all at once. It wasn't me that was writing it. It was [...] a giant pencil from the sky" (Van Zandt 2012). Van Zandt was articulating a feeling familiar to many who work creatively. It may appear as if the materials for the inventive process reach us from somewhere beyond our control, happening upon us as in a sort of epiphany that we can only undergo. Another singer-songwriter, Daniel Johnston, stated that the titular promise of his song *True Love Will Find You in the End* comes with a catch: "Only if you're looking can it find you." In the amorous as in the writing event, we are visited by affective forces that overwhelm the spirit. But Johnston adds an irony to the passivity suggested in Van Zandt's example: such accidental interventions can actively be invited.

This paradox of an active passivity is in line with a kind of on-demand creativity frequently promoted by the notebook-guidebooks. Time and again, their points of advice are derived from the same core notion of a self-inflicted inspiration where the writer's authority must first be relinquished and affirmed in its fugitive dispersion. Then, the unanticipated elements amplified by that escape can reconvene to inspire new initiations that begin as more calculated inductions, whose backwash is again propelled by the next involuntary inflow. This is a dialogical version of two historically juxtaposed interpretations of creativity that in western literary advice date back at least to one of its earliest instances, Edgar Allan Poe's *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846). Many publications within the culture have since continued to uphold this duplicity. On one side is found "the Muse": creation ignited by rapturous impulse, organic intuition, ecstatic frenzy, which occur as spontaneous visitations. On the other side is located the ideology of "craft": writing as a matter of methodical skill, honed technique, design, discipline, step-by-step composition. Other texts, like the notebook-guidebooks, however, propose a spectral continuum that folds in aspects of its extremes toward a re-enchantment of the thoroughly professionalized and institutionalized pursuit of creative writing: a compromise of creative receptivity, active passivity, attentive inattention, willed involuntariness, a

consciousness of the unconscious. The discourse of these documents is revealing. Synonyms for the creative process found in the cases of this essay include stumbling, following, getting seized, being struck/grabbed by, reawakening, capturing, summoning, fueling, sparking, haunting, dazzling, hatching, jump-starting, nudging, and launching. The materials of creation are imagined as triggers, catalysts, gifts, rumblings, seeds, sparks, or springboards.

Appropriate to the belief that creativity's generative components cannot entirely be planned of one's will, the notebook advice rejects the pretension that all aspects of writing could be learned by following technical *poietic* recipes—something must be left to chance encounters and discoveries not hypothesized. Ralph Fletcher announces in the introduction to his notebook-guidebook: “You won't find any clever formulas or neat recipes in these pages” (Fletcher 1996, p. 5), and Diana Raab prefaces her compilation by proclaiming: “There is no formula for keeping a notebook” (Raab 2010, p. ix). Instead, we are told that “Your notebook can help you live in a state of creative readiness: to be sensitive to ideas and inspiration the way a piece of photographic paper is sensitive” (Fletcher 1996, p. 16), and that “A writing journal is only a process by which one looks at life” (Raab 2010, p. 125). Put differently, the pedagogy of creative receptivity deals not necessarily in precise writing techniques. It tries rather to impart certain attitudes, orientations, or dispositions toward the seduction of inspiring influences active in the peripheries of one's awareness. Students are conditioned into a particular *positionality* that encourages a relation of mutual qualification with those highly *mobile* materials that so easily migrate beyond that which can be anticipated. For David Mas Masumoto, the important thing is to “capture the creative spirit” (in Bender 1997, p. 207), and, as Mark Pawlak learned from his teacher Denise Levertov, the notebook offers such “a way of inviting the Muse” (in Raab 2010, p. 135).

Despite their re-enchantment of creative writing, the invocation of the Muses appears in the notebook-guidebooks in a demystified form. Ralph Fletcher, for instance, prefers “a more plebeian vision of the process” to that of the Muse (Fletcher 1996, p. 14). Inspiration will not necessarily manifest as gems of profound insight tailored to the literary registers that desire them, but tends to hide out in the mundane environments of day-to-day life. “The Muse is as likely to sit across the bar from you as to come by your office for a chat,” writes John DuFresne. (in Raab 2010, p. 119). Those are the kind of maneuverable spaces where the student

can adopt certain attitudes to attract that which might “serendipitously” become relevant to artistic work, and requires real effort rather than being a congenital capacity. In this respect, the notebook, once more, takes up an intermediary position. As the common instrument of both quotidian observations and creative writing, it straddles two universes which Fletcher names “a real life and a textual life” (Fletcher 1996, p. 30), and which Diana Raab identifies as “one’s personal life and literary life” (Raab 2010, p. 185). The notebook is a waystation that directs and gives temporary refuge to literature’s embryonic particles as they are in transit between universes. The advice thus goes: take your notebook out into the world and subject yourself to those impulses that are so hard to come by from the isolation of the writer’s room, i.e., literary life alone.

This idea of mundane inspiration underlines again that literary art is not conceived within the vacuum of a system of writing conventions whose rules one must simply internalize. Rather, as in Walter Besant and Henry James’s early claims, the elements of art are the business of one’s life. The event takes nourishment as “Our pen drinks deep at the veins of the moment,” to phrase it with the writer Edmond Jabès (Jabès 1991, p. 156). The materials for writing are afforded by the world; the appetite of literary becoming grows in that world’s “literary” lived experience. And herein lies a major significance of the notebook’s instrument. The technological co-extensiveness of notebook, body, and environment yields a highly particular way of experiencing the drawing-out of elements for artistic work and their transduction<sup>5</sup> into written form. Robin Hemley testifies: “I find that when I carry my journal, things worthy of being recorded seem to pop up all around me, which leads me to suspect, of course, that these things are always happening around me. I’m just more observant when I have my journal with me” (in Bender 1997, p. 18).

As the notebook qualifies the dispositions of its carrier, a text that has still to invent itself is already attracting materials for the incident of its formal taking. Roland Barthes cited Gustave Flaubert’s belief in this orientation: “I am a man-pen, I feel through the pen; because of it, in relation to it and so much more with it” (Barthes 2011, p. 147). Reginald Gibbons, as well, articulates it beautifully when he calls keeping a notebook a “being-in-language” (in Bender 1997, p. 79). If writing inspiration is a matter of mutual solidarity between the affordances of everyday habitats and the creative-receptive attitudes of their inhabitants, then note-taking becomes something like a way of thinking and feeling more than a practice ancillary to experience; a way of living, whose event

is satisfied by occasions of the word coming into its own. This notion is reflected by Katherine Dunn, when she argues: “These notes exist because thinking about a project doesn’t all take place during specified, official writing time. You grab ideas when they come, and they come oddly, triggered by anything, because the novel is always in the back of your head” (in Junker 1995, p. 85). When living permanently in the mobile studio of the notebook, “writing time is all the time” (Buckner 2005, p. 94).<sup>6</sup>

If writing time is all the time, since lures for literary tending hide out in the quotidian environment, there is a fault in wanting to separate “private” note-taking and “literary” writing absolutely. And if the creative event involves reciprocal conditioning between writer and writing, they cannot be divorced as producer and product. In a staunch defense of creative writing as a matter of craft and skill, Nancy Kuhl puts forward such an essentialist dyad of, on the one hand, literary and public writing, and, on the other hand, a totally homogenized mass of journal writing, diary writing, personal, private, self-expressive, egocentric, and therapeutic writing. Kuhl is convinced that “Private journal and diary writing [...] differs dramatically from literary writing. [...] Generally, private writing is an end in itself” (Kuhl 2005, p. 4). I am not. In addition to the habitual assimilation of literature with the business of its public commodities, the equation of private writing and egocentric, even therapeutic, writing is problematic (and potentially dangerous). I see no reason why personal writing in the writer’s journal should of necessity be born from egomania. In the creative-receptive orientation, where the environment’s literary affordances entice and are tempted by the subject’s “being-in-language,” the components of this subject’s constitution are added as only “one” among several agencies that partake in the creative event as it culminates in that subject’s experience.

The writerly subject is not the be-all and end-all of writing. Its dynamic archive joins the generative elements and formative potential of a larger relational activity of disjunction advancing into conjunction—an argument for humility, much more than for egocentricity. This is a way to interpret the sense of creative depersonalization in Townes Van Zandt’s example, namely as a *being-with* the other ingredient agencies of the event on the cusp of climaxing self-creatively into an occasion of writing. To give just one example, Kuhl’s own repeated mention of the sitcom *Sex “in” the City* demonstrates how the materials of language co-compose with the writer and produce creative accidents. A “journal writing” that is end-less and creatively receptive to more impulses than one could

sovereignly intend cannot be equated with mere self-expression or even self-discovery, because “the” self, with each event, is *in the making*; its being is itself the articulation of an effect. Once more with Barthes: “*To Write, middle verb: I write, and in doing so I’m affected in the very process of writing*” (Barthes 2011, p. 148; original emphasis).

“Dramatically” setting apart literary writing from private writing, which includes the mundane observations in the notebook, avoids the shared materials and potential nomadism between the contextual and textual universes too comfortably. We find an alternative point of view early on in Ralph Fletcher’s notebook-guidebook: “If I want to write movingly I must first pay attention to what moves me” (Fletcher 1996, p. 11). He at once intimates the passageways between the personal and the literary, as well as the joint creativity of the self and the influences in excess of it, its more-than. Literary is neither any writing that is conventional or published, nor just anything that is merely noted down, but rather a writing within which a force of feeling is kept astir. Fletcher’s adage brings to mind how Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari understand art and literature as the preservation of affects (e.g., Deleuze and Guattari 1994, pp. 163–199). To the writer, actively stepping into new environments, notebook in hand, is a kind of sensation provocation. From these occasions of encounter between body-notebook-world, felt intensities emerge, and the writer tries to preserve a “liveness” of feeling for their repetition by mobilizing just the right language forms. These forms and their constellations become the building blocks for the labor of composition—vocabulary, syntax, rhythm, etc.—so that the writer in a sense composes with forces of feeling, which may originate in the most quotidian encounters. The meaning of such preservation is not identical endurance, but creative resonance: singularities of experience are escorted to the verge of new immediacies, as when the memory of a past occasion is enlivened by an affect that is both the particular residue of that past and its “real-time” vibrancy. Lisa Shea, in a discourse of her own, outlines a strikingly similar process:

In journaling, raw emotion is extruded into words onto the page, which are then lifted and transformed through the imaginative process of creation, then reexperienced, tasted again, but from a distance, in a way that is pleasurable. This transformation—the release, return to, and reshaping of pure-bodied emotions I spill into my journal; this attempt to make

meaning; to make art from raw experience—traces the journey from despair to ecstasy. (in Raab 2010, p. 76)

The refrain of creative receptivity, of being moved and writing movingly, is the foundation for much of the notebook advice. Immediacies of feeling get fed into and spill out of writing's event. In. And out. Intensities migrate from milieu to milieu and survive by adaptation; a dynamic that could be imagined as a pulse, even though its causality and trajectory are not always apparent. For the writer, the notebook may serve as the vehicle for these travels between "real" or "personal" and "textual" or "literary" universes. It explains why Reginald Gibbons, for example, finds "live words with feeling and thought still pulsing in them" in his notebooks (in Bender 1997, p. 77; in Raab 2010, p. 123), and why Roland Barthes considered note-taking a form par excellence to produce the "concision of affect and writing" (Barthes 2011, p. 107).

To my mind, then, it makes sense to interpret certain points of advice in the notebook-guidebooks from the perspective of creative receptivity and the mediation of immediacy. I list here the most frequently recurring ones, some of which overlap with the lore of literary advice as a whole, but are interesting in light of this particular philosophy. *Declutter your mind and observe*—relinquish preoccupations so as not to drown out the other agencies of the creative event. *Take your notebook everywhere*—live in a state of creative readiness where the world's literary becoming is disposed through a being-in-language. *Write down everything, all the time and record observations and conversations from everyday environments*—anticipate and tend to the potential of travel between contextual and textual universes. *Give importance to detail, write small*—the intensity of feeling may peter out if it is smothered by verbosity or premature conformity to convention. *Record dreams, extreme emotions and indelible memories, and do so without censorship*—pay attention to the immediacy of those unsolicited experiences that are not predestined by the writing project's design. *Read a lot, take reading notes and collect quotes*—collect language forms as resources to transduce and preserve forces of feeling. *Reread your notes and practice reliving*—find examples in your own notations where writing's form succeeded at preserving the singular experience of past occasions into new immediacies.



## BESIDENESS: MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Despite the notebook-guidebooks' promoting of a writing for writing's sake, they do recognize the common want for active publication. At some point students might wish to "take control" of their scribbles and envision those aspects of generic codes and textual modes with which their note-taking was not necessarily concerned before. The reality is that few writers achieve authorship through the production of notes alone, and some students might desire bringing their own toward a more conclusive piece of writing that could perhaps even be made into a literary commodity—the habitual association of published and finished writing is never entirely unsettled in the guidebooks. After all, notebooks are not only seducers of inspiration and records to take-note of incidents as they happen. They are also *workbooks*; appliances for the word's becoming to be sculpted further and pass on into other texts. "Notebooks are, by definition, workbooks, deliberately kept as part of a transformative process" (Howard Junker in Junker 1995, p. 2). They are seminal documents; they carry seeds in which their potential future budding is immanent and, what is unique, they formalize this refrain of concrete unity and its uprooting in the instants of writing's rebeginning.

This transitional dynamic of notes passing on into new textual order involves a certain excess value, a *besideness*. What did not ensure relevance in the event's phasing into one synchronized stage of the literary work's development might still come to modulate the next phase of concreteness. What's *beside* "the point" matters (maybe). A text, a notebook's textualizing leap, is not confronted head-on, but rather obliquely, from the side, curving along with all kinds of vectors in and expansions of the notebook's materials and the writer's evolving subjective particles. Even at the stage where *the* text takes on a more pronounced form as writing's object, and trajectories are etched and habits born from the recurrence of the same data within successive events, there will always remain the eventful novelty of that which exceeds that text (even after the fact of publication, as many writers will know to their despair). We witness the emergence of another type of creative figure: the re-writer. I take *besideness* here as a name for rewriting's participation in the more-than or other-than of a text's particular actualization, the surplus of its togetherness.

Kathleen Tyau wonders: "Why do we think published writers – including our favorite writers – got the words right the first time around?"

(in Bender 1997, p. 300). Yet Michelene Wandor, in a criticism of what she considers the patronizing tone of literary advice books, doubts that similar perceived assumptions live up to reality, asking “did anyone ever *really* think that a novel/poem/play appeared complete and perfectly formed in its final published version?” (Wandor 2008, p. 114). Perhaps not. But, ironically, the repeated derision of critics toward the common “writing for writing’s sake” ideology within literary advice, as well as the curriculum’s required filiations, certainly drive the debutant’s vulnerabilities into a similar paranoia. One could wonder *who*, actually, holds these beliefs; and whose tone, in fact, is really patronizing. These inquiries may well coincide with the question of who presumes to be *in-the-know* and whose *know-how* pushes to curb the eventness of writing creatively from its incipience.

Alexandria Peary, for instance, refers to the “get-your-thinking-right-first-then-write” approach of much writing instruction in the 1960s” (see Peary in this book). Aimee Buckner, whose notebook-guidebook is aimed at creative writing teachers working with nine-/ten-year-old students, makes a great point about “the afraid-to-be-wrong syndrome,” where children learn from a very young age that “if they do the task correctly the first time they won’t have to do it over” (Buckner 2005, pp. 95, 23). Educators often reinforce such a “guess what’s already in my head” attitude all the way into higher education. This particular brand of pedagogy can dramatically impede creative work, discouraging it from (re)inventing its pedagogical needs in and upon the process of its materials coming together. After the advice of an end-less writing for writing’s sake and that of the creative-receptive orientation, a third major group of advice that I find in the notebook-guidebooks consists of strategies and the conditioning of attitudes around doing things over; the besidness of textual becoming in rewriting.

The title of Ralph Fletcher’s notebook-guidebook, *Breathing In, Breathing Out*, imagines the preserving of feeling in word forms in the notebook as inhaling, and the work of rewriting those materials into a text as the exhaling phase of the pulse before shelf life. In. Out. Flowing. Ebbing. “*Breathing Out* suggests that the notebook is a fine place from which to take what you have collected and use it to spark your own original writing” (Fletcher 1996, p. 2). The notebook-guidebooks hold rereading and reworking to be just as crucial as the initial transductions between world and word in note-taking. A major recurring couple of

recommendations in this respect urges students to examine their notebooks for inchoate ideas and consider the importance of bad writing. Ralph Fletcher proposes that, in their notebooks, students should keep alive what he names, after Carl Rogers, unprepossessing “infant ideas” (ibid., pp. 1–5). They are those early stirrings of thought that are assumed quickly because their chaotic entanglement of forces seems somehow significant, even though the relevance among and beyond the factors of this knot is only discriminated as trivial or vague. However, when these infant ideas are kept alive, which we could understand as affect preservation, they have a tendency to weave their value together with other materials and let writing’s event develop further after the antecedent fact of notation: “my writing down these few words was not really my first attempt to begin to create a scene for the larger work, but rather a kind of marker buoy that I threw into the waters to remind me to go back and search the depths beneath it,” we read in Reginald Gibbons (in Raab 2010, p. 121).

The notation of infant ideas, in other words, nestles a kind of writing out of time, already implied in the futurity of its rekindling, never fatally self-synchronized. Kim Stafford describes her notebook beautifully as “the location for my own first handshake with the infinite” (in ibid., p. 23). Rebecca McClanahan refers to the notebook as a “compost heap” (in ibid., p. 127), while Ralph Fletcher imagines it as an incubator: “It gives you a place to incubate very new ideas before they are strong and mature enough to face the harsh light of rational judgment, let alone public scrutiny” (Fletcher 1996, pp. 1–2). Upon rereading the notebook, the quiver of embryonic ideas encounters and alters the Work’s developing conception and their common relevance is narrowed down. They begin to function for the re-writer as what Aimee Buckner terms “seed ideas” (Buckner 2005, p. 29) that motivate the continuation of writing. If we should again resist this advice for how it predicates us as utterly clueless, consider how often we forego caring for (or even just noting down) a moving idea just for its faint shimmer of intensity, the bare reason of its infinite feeling. How often we get discouraged when it does not instantly serve the imagination of a larger structure like a text or work of literature, or when our internalized audiences already disapprove. Wendy Call reflects on her own practice that: “*unadulterated* is the perfect word to describe journal writing. The sentences in my journal are those laid down fresh, unencumbered, and undamaged by the internal and external

censors that buzz around our words as we polish them for public display” (in Raab 2010, p. 88).

Rather few of our infant ideas and the initial transductions between environment and language in the notebook are readily adapted for integration into a common, coherent framework. They tend to arrive ugly, clumsy, poorly symbolized. As I argued with Robin Hemley they come end-lessly when we are not trying too hard to make *Art*. Yet, despite their disorderly welter among the many pages of the notebook archive, they carry the potential for successive intervals of form-taking. One proposed way to cultivate the originative aptitude suspended in notes is to seriously entertain unpolished, bad writing. Phillip Lopate contends in his preface to Diana Raab’s compilation that: “No one can expect to write well who would not first take the risk of writing badly. The writer’s notebook is a safe place for such experiments to be undertaken” (in *ibid.*, p. viii). In the process-document of the notebook, bad writing is an exercise in impermanence, more than an end result of ineptitude. Its chaos informs propositional openings for the ingredient elements of notes to spiral inward into new nodes. Ralph Fletcher attests how: “It is not that I *try* to write badly in my notebook. But I know I will be doing exactly that, just like countless other writers before me” (Fletcher 1996, p. 56).

Based on this awareness, the notebook-guidebooks generally approach failure in attaining the artwork affirmatively, as something to recover rather than recover from. “We need to allow ourselves to fail,” Fletcher states (*ibid.*). This implies by no means that our ambitions should be limited to bad writing. Instead, it supports how notes that are poorly integrable into one junction of the text-at-ease can still serve as an offering of resources to yet another event that survives this impermanent formation as it baffles its order. Surprise is the hope of writing’s endurance. The continuation of writing is an adventure of the textual object’s more-than, lifted from its besideness by the act of rewriting, before this excess perishes in its turn as the experience of another concrete form. Thus, failure is creative, for better or for worse, and that which is beside the point *makes a difference*. It brings along a force of differing. What did not turn out to be relevant to the end of writing can still introduce a creative differential to an event that requalifies how that end previously cohered.

The process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, whose philosophy I appropriate in this essay, held that “the word Creativity expresses the notion that each event is a process issuing in novelty”; “Creativity is

the principle of *novelty*" (Whitehead 1967, p. 236; Whitehead 1978, p. 21). Some "thing" conveniently identified in an apparent state of rest does not therefore infinitely arrest its transitional creativity. Smuggle a little stranger into its ecology experienced as halted and you welcome things happening; things' happenings again take action. Thus the event inevitably bleeds beyond the instant and carries off its matter-of-factness to pass on into novelty. The same is true of the timeless kernels among these notes that continue to tremble with potential despite the fact of their inscription. I believe Kathleen Tyau expresses something of this nature when describing her own practice: "I write about *the same thing again and again until I feel something happen*, and then I revise, revise, revise. I listen first for the voice and then look for the story, for the real subject. Then I attend to the language, images, and so forth" (in Bender 1997, p. 300; emphasis added).

At the stage of rewriting, the data to be introduced and *make a difference* can now more explicitly include familiar elements of a more coherent structure, like a text or work of literature. Aimee Buckner's notebook-guidebook, for instance, provides exercises to reread and reshape one's notes with a focus on attributes of narrative fiction: genre codes, plot development, character evolution, conflict resolution, paragraph structures, etc. When re-writers eventually dispose their revisions through such elements, the inaugural notes expose their inclinations and shared tendencies toward what genetic criticism calls the "*devenir-texte*" ("becoming-text"). If this priming were introduced to writing straight away, an abundance of our infant ideas could just spill beyond the mold. Considering the typical prolongation of the invention phase in much of literary advice that I pointed to with Alexandria Peary, it might not come as a surprise that the notebook-guidebooks are most distinctly lacking in providing practical instructions on how to prompt and manipulate this textualization. Even though the chaos of writing's event often does not appear stabilized for very long, rewriting now brings ingredients into the fold that are codified and repeated. There is a missed opportunity in the notebook-guidebooks when they do not formulate more explicitly what those resources can be or how they tend to influence composition. Instead, the transitional potentiality of besidness is once more wrapped up in certain attitudes or mindsets. Most of them are iterations of the following: *be patient (wait for it)*, *be gentle and forgiving with yourself*, *view the notebook as a safe space*, and, a classic within the advice culture, *writing is serious and hard work*.

I do, however, see an underlying point of interest here. With the besiderness in the act of rewriting, concrete elements of textuality are (re)introduced to each other and continue to differentiate feedback loops between what's purposeful and useful and what's end-less and useless. These relays generate surplus values that overwhelm the sum of their parts. This highlights how, even if writing does feel close to functioning as a means to satisfy a predicted end, there is never *not* an "invention phase" lying in wait. The end procures some resolution, but not sufficiency. It is one of the junctions punctuating writing's event as it stutters and hiccups along into novelty; another nexus knotted into the propositional weave of the *notebook*. "Completion is the kiss of death," "The moment is a miniscule door to duration," wrote Edmond Jabès (Jabès 1991, pp. 140, 186). The notebook-guidebooks set apart, firstly, an end-less writing for writing's sake as an event with its own middling ability, and, secondly, the procedure of rewriting where the writer is supposed to take ownership of more purposeful mediations. Yet this should not be taken to suggest an absolute linear seriality issuing in inertia, as if the event's excess would suddenly get drained by the introduction of the writer's intercessions, or the advent of the work would forever kill the creativity of novelty. Rather than terminating one another fatally, the potentialities of these phases exist in one another immanently, in a liaison of reciprocal influence and necessity. With Whitehead: "Each stage carries in itself the promise of its successor, and each succeeding stage carries in itself the antecedent out of which it arose" (Whitehead 1978, p. 165). Writers at any stage of their projects or careers can turn to their notes to find a besiderness that untangles and joins anew the temporary togetherness of their texts: "The work is malleable—an evolving, living thing in a constant state of flux" (James Brown in Raab 2010, p. 3).

While the end-less and self-creative event of writing surpasses intentionality and absolute final order with the creative excess of the unknown and thus unsettles the notion of some transcendent architect, it in no way means that creation can do without the writer altogether. To formulate the paradox once more with Whitehead: "No things are 'together' except in experience; and no things *are*, in any sense of 'are', except as components in experience or as immediacies of process which are occasions in self-creation" (Whitehead 1967, p. 236). The advice in the notebook-guidebooks, as I see it, is then not to sit back, relax, and let the Muse do all the work for you. Instead, creative writers are educated to become the event's nurturers, its inductors, trained in escorting the composition of

materials that qualify its swerve into novelty and encouraged to become acquainted with its quaint inclinations.

## NOTES

1. Ralph Fletcher published another notebook-guidebook in 1996, entitled *A Writer's Notebook: Unlocking the Writer Within You*. I do not cite this work in my essay, since its advice closely parallels his other book, but in a language adapted to readers ages eight to twelve.
2. In order to keep an oversight, when referring to contributions from the compilations edited by Howard Junker, Sheila Bender, and Diana Raab, I cite the compilations in which these texts appear, rather than the individual pieces.
3. This egalitarian view is supported by a peculiar medium of notebook advice which I do not discuss in this essay. Notebooks are available on the market where a blank writing utensil is interspersed with instructional and inspirational writing advice from established authors. The common field of activity between “master” and “dilettante” is thus embodied in a physical object, demonstrating how the notebook is a shared name for both an instrument and its product. An example of this medium is *The Signature Notebook Series*, published since 2016. Following the same logic, we could refer to the fact that Howard Junker’s edited compilation features facsimiles of the contributors’ own notes.
4. On the notion of *making* sense and accepting *common* sense in pedagogy, in relation to Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy, see Snir (2018).
5. The use of the term “transduction” is borrowed mainly from the work of Gilbert Simondon. Here is a concise definition: “Originating from the sciences and crucially developed in its philosophical implications by Simondon, transduction refers to a dynamic operation by which energy is actualized, moving from one state to the next, in a process that individuates new materialities” (De Assis 2017, p. 696).
6. A particular kind of “being-in-language” is performed by the notebook-guidebooks as part of their pedagogical method. One of the reasons why these documents may feel impractical or ineffectual is that their authors are themselves creative writers and they often articulate their advice in creative registers. Yet in doing so, they engage a kind of learning by resonance or osmosis. They orient the dispositions of the learner toward the literary becoming of language, by making it part of the didactic text. Therefore, Michelene Wandor’s claim that books of literary advice are “metatexts” (Wandor 2008, p. 108) could be nuanced. Roland Barthes offers an alternative point of view that is relevant to the notebook-guidebooks: “*writing*

is not fully writing unless there's a renunciation of metalanguage; Wanting-to-Write can only be articulated in the language of Writing: this is the autonomy" (Barthes 2011, p. 9).

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# “Writing by Prescription”: Creative Writing as Therapy and Personal Development

*Leni Van Goidsenhoven and Anneleen Masschelein*

## INTRODUCTION

In *The Author is Not Dead* (2008), Micheline Wandor extensively cites Gillie Bolton’s writing advice for starting authors, a six-minute freewriting exercise, as an example for what creative writing should not be:

For most creative writing teachers, the tone and content of the above is probably not at all problematic. However, this does not come from a CW textbook. It is taken from a patient’s leaflet in a GP surgery, used to help with ‘anxious’ or ‘depressed’ patients. In that context, it may be couched in the most productive way. But the fact that it is indistinguishable from CW advice, should give us all pause. This extract leads into the heart of CW methodology, which is suspended in an uncomfortable contradiction in the Romantic/therapy axis. (Wandor 2008, pp. 118–119)

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In the eyes of Wandor, and of poet and creative writing scholar Nancy Kuhl, good creative writing is about language and craft, rather than about self-expression. While this may be a legitimate therapeutic aim, it is detrimental for the field of creative writing. Creative writing for therapeutic reasons (hereafter “therapeutic writing” or TW) indiscriminately praises all creative efforts, leading to uncritical, unproductive, and overly self-referential writing. Contrary to Wandor and Kuhl, we consider TW handbooks as a subgenre of the contemporary CW handbooks selections which caters to a “niche” of illness and disability narrative writing, which is increasingly becoming part of the field of memoir writing (Couser 2012, p. 12). At the same time, we will argue that TW handbooks can potentially reach a surprisingly broad and diverse audience of patients, aspiring writers, counselors, creative writing teachers, and qualitative researchers experimenting with new methods of “writing as inquiry” (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005). In the twenty-first century, in the wake of the so-called memoir boom, therapeutic writing has left the therapy room and entered the commercial sphere, as a relatively large and stable market for illness and disability narratives has developed (Rak 2013). While Kuhl deplores that the “connection between creativity and psychotherapy is relativist and deeply marketplace oriented” (Kuhl 2005, p. 10), we seek to draw attention not only to the long history and diversity of TW, but also to the possibilities that it can entail.

In the present chapter, we will focus on three of the most important advice oeuvres in this field. Gillie Bolton has published widely on how every person, especially medical professionals and their patients, can benefit from expressive and exploratory writing. Kate Thompson explicitly focuses on journal writing as a therapeutic tool, and Celia Hunt is the founder of a postgraduate program in creative writing and personal development at the University of Sussex. All three authors have been published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers (JKP), a leading international publisher of professional, academic, and self-help books in the field of neurological and cognitive differences. Combining both textual and contextual analysis, we will investigate how the how-to books relate to the therapeutic and self-help ethos as well as to more literary forms of creative writing, and how they negotiate the ideas of becoming a writer, craft, therapy, and self-expression. We will argue that therapeutic writing advice serves as a formal and ideological framework which allows, guides, and also “coaxes” subjects to talk and think about the self, illness, and disability in a particular way (Van Goidsenhoven and Masschelein 2017, p. 4). While this can

be regarded as constraining, the institutional context of JKP also consistently encourages writers to become authors, and thus, against the explicit advice of its handbook authors, to make their personal writings public.

## THERAPEUTIC WRITING: A LONGSTANDING HISTORY AND A HETEROGENEOUS FIELD

The link between writing and health can be traced back to Antiquity, with Apollo as the god of both poetry and medicine, and with practices such as the Laments of Ancient Greece (Sijakovic 2011), and the supplication of the Ancient Egyptian through letter writing to the gods to heal diseases. (Williamson and Wright 2018). In his essay "Self Writing," Michel Foucault shows how writing (and reading) in Greco-Roman culture was associated with meditation and how it functioned as a technique of caring for the self and of sustaining "the art of living" (Foucault 1997, pp. 208–209).<sup>1</sup> Today, the popularity of creative writing as therapy and as a transformative healing purposes is associated with a society immersed in a culture of self-help, confession, and emotionalism, in which the therapeutic discourse has become a major code to express, shape, and guide self-hood (Illouz 2008, p. 6; Gilmore 2001; McGee 2005).

In the past four decades, there has been an explosion of interest in the history and practice of creative writing for therapeutic, transformative, and healing purposes, not only from counselors, clinicians, academics, and writers, but also from researchers, who have examined its psychological, social, and emotional benefits. Thus, TW has become an academic, therapeutic, and creative field in its own right, albeit a heterogeneous one. Even those involved, as Anni Raw et al. argue, conceptualize, perceive, and interpret the practice in many different ways (Raw et al. 2012, p. 97).<sup>2</sup> As a result, the terminology used to refer to therapeutic writing practices ranges from "creative (life) writing for therapeutic purposes," to "therapeutic creative writing," "personal expressive and explorative writing," "expressive writing," "programmed writing," "controlled writing," and so on. Likewise, the definitions may highlight different aspects: transformational and health outcomes, self-expression, or the dichotomy between creativity and craft. Therapeutic writing involves a variety of professions, sites, approaches, and goals. Workshops can be organized as one-to-one sessions, or as groups, led by a writing facilitator who can also be a professional author, a creative

writing teacher, as well as a clinician, a health practitioner such as a nurse, a social worker, or therapist. TW can be embedded within another therapeutic trajectory, or it can serve as a therapy on its own. It can take place anywhere according to the maxim that “you only need pen and paper,” and the structure and principles can be adapted to specific groups: prisoners, refugees, children, psychiatric patients, etc. The approaches of TW workshops range from using narrative and psychodynamic models of counseling, to more informal and intuitive styles of practice. Participants are referred to as patients, clients, or service users. Some methods focus on writing by people with mental illnesses (e.g., depression, anxiety, schizophrenia), or somatic illnesses (e.g., asthma, rheumatoid arthritis, immunity), prioritizing either social or aesthetic outcomes, or a combination of the two. Finally, different genres can be chosen for the writing itself, such as journal writing, autobiography, poetry, song lyrics, drama, and letter writing.

Considering this diversity, it is not surprising that academic research on therapeutic writing is found in various disciplines, especially in journals devoted to the intersection between arts and health, journals focused on different forms of therapy, and journals on life writing. Broadly speaking, there are two approaches of the phenomenon: On the one hand exists the quantitative approach of experimental psychologists, who have conducted randomized controlled trials of the effectiveness of TW as a therapeutic tool while on the other hand, within more qualitative-oriented research found in educational studies (and more recently in literary and cultural studies), scholars develop a more holistic view of self-development and creativity.<sup>3</sup>

### PROGRAMMED VERSUS NON-RESTRICTIVE WRITING

A pioneer of the first type of approach is social psychologist James Pennebaker, who, along with colleagues, experimented with what they call “expressive writing” in relation to psychical and emotional health. In order to measure the effects of expressive writing, the participants’ blood pressure readings, heart rates, and self-reports of mood and physical symptoms are gathered before and after each writing session. Many variations of the Pennebaker procedure have been developed since.<sup>4</sup> The majority of these research projects and therapeutic set-ups work with short writing tasks that are restrictive and highly standardized, hence the term “programmed writing” (L’Abate 2004; Smyth 1998). The many attempts

to systematically prove the effect of therapeutic writing and the preoccupation for quantitative outcomes are likely to go hand in hand with an effort to prove to the effectiveness of art to funding agencies or to more broadly promote its usefulness for society (Swinnen 2016, p. 1379; Williamson and Wright 2018). After years of developing and conducting randomized controlled trials, internationally and across different populations, there seems to be evidence that therapeutic writing produces beneficial effects for patients, although it is not (yet?) clear why this is the case (Hustvedt 2016, p. 101).

In contrast to the experimental paradigm and its "programmed writing," a more qualitative approach focuses on so-called non-restrictive writing. The psychological discourse, with its emphasis on empirical evidence and concrete terminology, here gives way to a more humanist and ambiguous vocabulary, using words as such as "soul" (Chavis 2011, p. 12), "inner picture" (Thompson 2011, p. 41), "intuition" (Bolton 1999, p. 35), and phrases like "a page full of tears" (*ibid.*, p. 174), "speaking from the heart" (Moss 2012, p. 247), and "the art of freefall" (Turner-Vesselago 2013, p. 37). The research and workshops mostly stem from the idea that the aim of creativity is expression of the self.<sup>5</sup> The rationale follows that writing opens up a "window to the soul" and to the "personal truths" of the sufferer (in this case the person in need of therapy), as Bolton claims: "Writing offers a powerful avenue towards finding out what one thinks, feels, knows, understands, remembers" (Bolton et al. 2006, p. 3).

Authors in this paradigm favor variable and eclectic writing experiments, indicated as a "multi-faceted" practice (Sampson 2004, p. 17) or a "multidimensional jigsaw" (Bolton 2011, p. 9). Workshops are explicitly client-centered and based upon a meaningful relation between client and facilitator, paying attention to imagination and creativity (Bolton, Hunt), to artistic merit in terms of the specific qualities of writing as an act and process (Sampson), and in some cases also to craft (Freely, Hustvedt). Underlying the different approaches, however, is the emphasis on the therapeutic effects of these workshops and on mental and physical well-being they afford. Whereas the experimental approach addresses an academic or specialist audience, the qualitative approaches draw broader audiences of both academics and practitioners, facilitators as well as writers. For this reason, TW advice authors commonly evolve from creating more specialist books (in terms of content) to more popular works such as handbooks. This evolution can be viewed in light of

two tendencies: the professionalization of TW, and the pervasiveness of therapeutic culture.

Since the 1980s, in the Anglo-American world TW has been institutionalized by two professional organizations: The National Association for Poetry Therapy (NAPT) in the USA, and The Association for Literary Arts in Personal Development (Lapidus) in the UK. These organizations offer training programs for candidates who boast a double background in psychology (or counseling) and in literature, developing standards, guidelines, and set research agendas. Lapidus is part of the Arts Council policy on literature provision in England, and the academic *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, edited by Nicholas Mazza, serves as the official mouthpiece of the NAPT. In the twenty-first century, TW as a discipline entered many academic programs in both Medical Humanities<sup>6</sup> and in Narrative Medicine.<sup>7</sup>

TW handbooks also fit in with what many studies have described as the “triumph” of therapeutic discourse, usually based on a psychoanalytic understanding of self and society, in the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> Psychology is not just a body of knowledge produced by formal organizations and experts, and its vocabulary has widely entered into social and cultural life via multiple institutional arenas and mass media. In *Saving the Modern Soul*, Eva Illouz analyzes the intersections of therapy, self-help, and autobiographical discourse (Illouz 2008, pp. 7–8). She argues that the combination of popular psychology and the cultural industries has led to the mass-production of objects, like TW handbooks. This has led to the widespread distribution of therapeutic discourse, which has shaped a new qualitative language and interpretative framework to think the self and others (ibid., p. 155).<sup>9</sup> In Illouz’s view, therapeutic culture is a “structure of feeling,” an inchoate, pre-ideological mental structure that is expressed in cultural objects (ibid., p. 156). The problem, according to Illouz, is that the discourse of therapeutic self-help is fundamentally sustained by a “narrative of suffering” (ibid., p. 173). Moreover, it resorts to standardized vocabulary and narrative structures which render it “highly compatible with the cultural industry because narrative pegs can be easily changed [...] to renewable consumption of ‘narratives’ and ‘narrative fashions’” (ibid., p. 147).

In her study of self-help literature, Micki McGee (2005) examines how self-help, one of the most commercial forms of therapeutic discourse, is driven both by an optimistic faith in the perfectibility and capacity for continual improvement of the individual, and by a vicious circularity

inherent in the very labels it creates and perpetuates. Therapeutic self-help books are presented as necessary guides to attain the intended realizations of the self, or of the desired achievements possible. While providing a (limited) comfort and improvement for the individual reader, they in fact set in motion a never-ending cycle of "work on the self," in which suffering and victimhood come to define the self (McGee 2005, p. 142). In what follows, we seek to draw attention to another type of cycle which may arise from the pervasiveness of therapeutic discourse, i.e., a cycle of consumption and activation, that ultimately allows new voices in the public domain and their (limited) forms of agency. In order to do this, we will take a closer look at the work of niche publisher Jessica Kingsley, that published the majority of TW handbook oeuvres in our corpus.

### JESSICA KINGSLEY PUBLISHERS: TURNING READERS INTO WRITERS

Founded in 1987 with a bank loan of £5000, and with eight research books addressing an intended audience of social workers and practitioners, JKP has managed to achieve annual revenue growth for the past 30 years, and now publishes over 250 books a year. Because of their commercial success, they were able to open an office in Philadelphia (USA) in 2004, and have been collaborating with Footprint Books in Warriewood (Australia) as well. Jessica Kingsley herself retired in mid-2018, and sold the company to the multinational publishing house Hachette. Despite this change in management, the company policy remains focused on making specialized knowledge available for non-specialists, and the company still presents itself an independent niche publisher of "books that make a difference" (JKP homepage 2019). Although JKP is mainly known for its list on autism spectrum, the company now also plays a leading role in distributing books on neurological difference, healthcare, education, art therapies, social justice, counseling, palliative care, adoption, and parenting, with new areas including gender diversity and Chinese medicine. Across these topics, their catalog features accessible academic research alongside memoirs and handbooks, thus fostering an inclusive and non-hierarchical publishing policy.

Kingsley attributes the company's commercial success to the combination of a focused and programmatic publishing list, her marketing background, and adherence to a clear policy. At the same time, she does not merely want to conform to the market, but rather their press seeks out



new directions in order to counter psychiatric stigmas and negative associations with, for instance, neurological differences (Tivnan 2007). For the JKP team, it is key to keep in constant touch with several communities, and by maintaining a close relationship, JKP learns about, and integrates new debates and new voices. As Lisa Clark, editorial director at JKP, states: “Being close to communities and the subject helps with identifying emerging topics and to stay abreast of changing language used around the subject” (Headon 2019). This way of working contributes to the emancipatory baseline of JKP’s policy and is visible in their catalog which includes memoirs by people who are traditionally not associated with authorship, even though they report about their lives in narrative forms. In this way, experience transforms into expertise (Van Goidsenhoven and Masschelein 2017, p. 7).

However, this emancipatory stance has its limits. Although JKP is a niche publisher, it is not an experimental house. Its goal is not only to give voice to authors/communities, but also to create a public, and to sell. This means that JKP is not only looking for existing communities, but also actively creates a community. Today it is common for publishers to invest in reading communities and the construction of a brand profile, but JKP’s efforts to build a community with a highly specific target group are striking. Readers are addressed through intimate issues articulated in a sentimental mode that nonetheless exceeds the personal, and fosters recognition and understanding.<sup>10</sup> What is at stake here, is a form of community where readers are invited to share their experiences in such a way that the line between reading and writing becomes profoundly blurred. On the JKP blog, for instance, author Vanessa Rogers shared her writing tips for aspiring (life writing) authors. The post was accompanied by the straightforward message that “if you’re feeling inspired feel free to send in your proposal to post@jpk.com” (Rogers 2013).

Another manner of blurring reading and writing is through the large portfolio of advice books about creative life writing and therapeutic writing that actively shape the kind of publications that JKP seeks. Finding language to discuss (or even reflect upon) neurological difference or painful events in life is generally difficult, as is writing down your life story. To lower this threshold, JKP offers advice through books about writing, both creative and therapeutic. Twenty-two writing handbooks, published between 1998 and 2016, covering genres like poetry, journal, autobiography, and creative fiction, are included in the Arts Therapies catalog, alongside books on Play Therapy, Drama therapy and Story making,

Dance Therapy, Music Therapy, Art Therapy, Mental Health, and Trauma and Wellbeing, addressing professional as well as general audiences.<sup>11</sup> Some of the handbooks are part of a series edited by Gillie Bolton, "Writing for Therapy and Personal Development," which is framed as "appropriate for therapeutic, healthcare, or creative writing practitioners and facilitators, and for individual writers or courses" (Bolton 2011, back cover).

The Arts Therapies catalog is dominated by "quest narratives" and "triumph narratives" as the most popular plot structures in the context of illness and disability narratives.<sup>12</sup> The quest story is mostly interpreted as a story that addresses suffering directly, that urges readers to accept failure, illness, or disability, and to use them to their own advantage (Frank 1995, p. 115). Importantly, the JKP catalog neither focuses on the medical side of the healing process, in which a physician plays the most important role, nor on so-called supercrips, a term for people with an illness or disability who "nonetheless" excel at something like sports or science. Instead, the quest narratives are used to emphasize the positive aspects of being different, to focus on coping strategies in order to overcome obstacles in the interaction between an individual and society, and to highlight the promise of attainable progress and improvement. These formats and storylines are reinforced by paratextual elements, such as the titles that frequently feature phrases like "my way through," "transformation through," "healing power of creative expression," "writing routes," "writing works," and "creative solutions for life." The book covers, glossy and colorful with soft-covers depicting flowers, hearts, upward-leading staircases, writing angels, notebooks, and pens, are strikingly similar to other popular CW handbooks. Their two most recent handbooks, which are more geared toward fiction, both depict drawings of old-fashioned typewriters with colorful letters flying out, suggesting that writing is not just something to do in order to feel better, but also for fun.

The publisher's explicit foregrounding of formats like the quest and triumph narrative, both in content and in form, can be read as a negotiation with the marketplace, since these stories are more likely to become bestsellers than stories that connote stasis or chaos (Frank 1995, p. 83). The repetition of formats creates uniformity, which, along with offering a standardized vocabulary for complex and diverse topics, are strategies commonly used by cultural intermediaries like publishers. JKP's approach nonetheless stands out because it effectively opens up possibilities for

new types of voices, who in their writings, to some degree, resist standardization (Van Goidsenhoven and Masschelein 2017, pp. 15–16). The TW handbooks published by JKP mirror and highlight this ambivalence, and they diverge from other popular CW handbooks in that they are more focused on process than on product: The handbooks encourage subjects to write purely for themselves, not for publication, even though the context of JKP implicitly upholds this as a possibility.

### THREE THERAPEUTIC WRITING OEUUVRES: GILLIE BOLTON, KATE THOMPSON, AND CELIA HUNT

Gillie Bolton, a British consultant in therapeutic and reflective writing, works largely but not exclusively, in health care settings. She comes from a background of teaching creative writing, which she combines in her handbooks with pop-psychology and self-help, and has written eight books, five of which are advice books. All published with JKP (three monographs and two edited volumes), those advice books are currently the most popular handbooks in the field of TW, covering genres from journaling, poetry, prose, and autobiography. They are accessible, geared toward a wide audience, and aim to be both informative and practical.

Bolton's first advice book (1999) mainly focuses on the connection between theory and practice, but it already contains exercises and practical information. The two following advice books, *Writing Works* (2006) and *Writing Routes* (2011), are co-edited with Victoria Field and Kate Thompson. They are framed as essential roadmaps, containing a huge amount of examples, among which more than seventy clients/patients who share their writings and experiences. Her two latest advice books, *Write yourself* (2011) and *The Writer's Key* (2014), are designed as traditional literary advice guides, written in a hands-on and directive style wherein the reader/writer is always openly addressed and every chapter ends with *Write!*, "a menu of suggestions and strategies" to start writing (Bolton 2014, p. 15). The directive tone is also visible in the text design and typography. Bolton uses, for instance, many lists describing what one must do and capitals letters in order to stress rules or techniques.<sup>13</sup> In all her handbooks, she explicitly states that the book chapters can be read and used in any order, depending on the reader/writer's needs. All books contain appendices in which the exercises are arranged by genre (e.g., unsent letters, AlphaPoems, Diary), by client group (e.g., cancer patients, children, or the elderly), and by theme (e.g., childhood, illness, color).

At the same time, Bolton's exercises are also organized in a "developmental way" (Bolton 2014, p. 15), offering several foundational exercises which are important to begin with writing. One of Bolton's most popular foundational exercises is, for instance, a CW-based exercise called the "Six Minute Write" (Bolton 2011, p. 33), a sort of free (intuitive) writing to overcome beginner's blocks. While Bolton's main focus is on creating exercises for writing workshops with therapeutic goals, the handbooks also pay attention to writing as "a way of life" (Bolton et al. 2006, p. 230). Entire passages are devoted to the act of choosing the best place to write or even the ideal notebook or pen: "Writing materials are significant. Different equipment is likely to create different writings with very different impacts" (Bolton 2014, p. 41). Important for Bolton is that this way of life is attainable for everyone, since everyone can write: "If you trust yourself you cannot write the wrong thing" (Bolton 1999, p. 11). This is in line with the democratic idea of self-help, a discourse which pervades Bolton's advice books, for instance, through the use of certain metaphors such as "the key to unlock [...] the secrets" and to "open the door" to your "life solutions" (Bolton 2014, p. 17), or finding the key to help the writer to return "to the relationship with the self in a direct and immediate way" (Bolton et al. 2006, p. 27). Also typical for the self-help discourse is the circular quest of continual improvement and reflection. Working on the self is presented as an endless process which "goes round and round in circles – excitingly and dramatically" (Bolton 1999, p. 87). After all, "we keep on facing life changes" (Bolton 2011, p. 8), and "when life becomes difficult [...] the wisest person to turn to is often oneself" (Bolton 2014, p. 17). Accordingly, the writing facilitator is like a "midwife" or a "helper-on-the-way" (Bolton et al. 2006, p. 14), who "support(s) the writers in their own personal explorations and expressions" (Bolton 1999, p. 128).

Together with Bolton and Field, Kate Thompson is the co-editor of *Writing Routes* and *Writing Works*. Unlike Bolton, she does not come from a creative writing background, but is a psychotherapist and certified journal therapist, whose main work is clinical private practice (both online and face-to-face counseling) and supervision of other therapists. *Therapeutic Journal Writing: An Introduction for Professionals* (2011) is her single-authored handbook in which she develops journal writing as a therapeutic tool. Contrary to Bolton's advice, the book only focuses on journal writing as a genre, based on a protocol trademarked by Thompson.

The first chapters of *Therapeutic Journal Writing* offer the theoretical background, history, and key concepts of therapeutic journal writing.<sup>14</sup> Once the basics are covered, the focus shifts toward the techniques and protocol, each technique being elaborated in great detail in a separate chapter, illustrated with cases and ending with a “journal prompt” to get the reader started. The techniques are presented in a progressive way from structured to freer techniques, a principle Thompson borrows from Kathleen Adams’s *The Way of the Journal* (1998).<sup>15</sup> The reason for this progressive structure is to offer enough encouragement for less-experienced practitioners and more vulnerable clients.<sup>16</sup> Once the entire protocol has been followed, a personal structured repertoire consisting of several techniques can be assembled and used according to the writers’ own judgments as to what methods are appropriate for different times and for different reasons.

While Thompson consistently uses the word “technique,” and emphasizes the importance of formats and structured exercises, journaling, for her, is also an undeniable creative and personal act (Thompson 2011, p. 15). This allows her to connect the protocol of expressive writing and the open strategy of handbooks, which further advocate writing as lifestyle, symbolized by the appropriate writing implements (ibid., pp. 41, 43). She encourages her readers to personalize the exercises, and reassures them that “you cannot write the wrong thing” (ibid., p. 53). In typical self-help style, the personal dimension of writing is related to her own experiences: “At each stage of my professional journey I have used therapeutic journal writing [...] with myself to monitor my own process both in my professional practice and in my life” (ibid., p. 14). In an article on JKP’s blog that offers some advice on writing for yourself and with a group, Thompson also elaborates on her personal experiences:

My own journey from childhood diary writing in the 1960s to journal therapist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has indeed been an almost lifelong process. This journey continues today, propelling me into the modern work of blogs and internet therapy. (Thompson 2012)

The integration of personal experience enlivens the protocol, but it also clearly frames journal writing as a technology for monitoring the self in terms of continual improvement (change, healing, growth) and a never-ending cycle of work on the self (from childhood until the present), which can even have benefits for someone’s professional career.

JKP's third handbook author to be discussed, Celia Hunt, is Emeritus Reader in Continuing Education (Creative Writing) at the Centre for Community Engagement at University of Sussex Here, where she has set up the Certificate in Creative Writing as well as an MA program in Creative Writing and Personal Development with an associated research program in 1996. Hunt was also a founding member and first Chair of Lapidus. At the end of the twentieth century, Hunt published two TW advice books with JKP: *The Self on the Page: Theory and Practice of Creative Writing in Personal Development* (1998, with Fiona Sampson) and *Therapeutic Dimensions of Autobiography in Creative Writing* (2000). The former is an edited volume with a triple focus of providing an overview of different TW practices, on the application between theory and practice, and on possible exploration frameworks. The second book is based on Hunt's doctoral dissertation, and gives an account of her trajectory from a more creative writing context to a therapeutic one. This book starts with a description of her work with students enrolled in an academic Creative Writing and Personal Development course, which means that their writings were graded, and that the therapeutic benefit of writing was present "by chance rather than by design" (Hunt 2000, p. 186), but it led her to connecting creative writing work with writing as a tool in self-therapy or psychotherapy.

Hunt is convinced that literary techniques can stimulate self-knowledge and therapeutic effects: "Fictionalizing from ourselves and finding a satisfactory form for our fictions helps us to engage more deeply with our inner life, opening up possibilities for greater insight and self-understanding" (Hunt and Sampson 1998, p. 33). The link between creative writing and self-understanding is of course not new. Hunt consistently refers to seminal CW handbooks, like Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* (1973) and Dorothea Brande's *Becoming a Writer* (1981), which claim that writing appeals to one's deepest self. If you want to become a writer, so Brande states, it is best to be a balanced person, and the inverse is true as well: when a writer encounters problems with writing, there will be primarily personal problems, rather than a deficit in equipment and technique (Brande 1981, p. 33). While Brande and Elbow state that writers need to work on themselves in order to become writers, Hunt turns this around and argues that it is important to (learn to) write in order to achieve a healthy and balanced self.

Stylistically, Hunt's advice books are dense, providing detailed descriptions of writing exercises,<sup>17</sup> alongside psychoanalytic explanations.

Contrary to Bolton and Thompson, Hunt offers a theoretical model of therapeutic writing, based on a “Horneyan literary psychoanalytic approach,” which suggests that writing “throw(s) light on the present structure of the psyche through increasing intellectual understanding and emotional experiencing of the defenses in operation” (Hunt 2000, p. 160).<sup>18</sup> This psychoanalytic background is linked to Hunt’s post-structuralist literary and narratological frameworks, signaled by narratological concepts like “implied author,” “showing,” and “telling,” and references to scholars like Roland Barthes, Norman Friedman, and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan. This makes her books less accessible, but then again, accessibility is not her primary intention. In Hunt’s view, TW as practice is not suitable for everyone:

Writing of this kind would clearly not be appropriate for use with all patients or clients, as they would need to feel relatively at ease with the written word and preferably to have some familiarity with writing techniques. I would suggest that this approach might be particularly useful for writers who present with writer’s block, or for people who are accustomed to keeping a diary, or are more generally interested in the literary arts. (ibid., p. 181)

Unlike her fellow authors, Hunt’s focus is on enriching TW with insights from creative writing, literary theory, and psychoanalysis.

## CONCLUSION

Our brief characterization of three important TW advice authors and their oeuvres provides insight into the diversity and eclecticism of TW as a field, even in a commercial context such as JKP. Authors connect different traditions and framework, ranging from psychoanalysis, psychology, literary theory, and self-help, to underpin their theory and methods. Despite their diversity, however, they share a strong focus on writing as a process, rather than as product. For Hunt, writing-as-art and writing-as-therapy are not mutually exclusive (Hunt 2000, p. 185), but they are qualitatively different. Writing a story for therapeutic purposes is first and foremost done to gain more insight in one’s own feelings. It is only by reworking these first drafts, that communication with the writer within can be achieved. Writing to create a literary product is, therefore, a long and laborious work, which is not for everyone. Likewise,

Bolton agrees that a text is a construction that must be worked upon in order to achieve a product capable of communicating effectively with the reader/listener (Bolton 2011, p. 48). The process is what counts, Bolton states, because patients will not benefit from the idea that they are creating a form of art as soon as they pick up a pen. On the contrary, therapeutic writing is primarily a private practice (Bolton 1999, p. 225; Thompson 2011, p. 52).

Still, sharing therapeutic writing with a known, trusted, and intimate audience might have some benefits. A group anthology of shareable, redrafted writings, which can be given to family or friends, can provide a wonderful affirmation. Likewise, an informal reading to the rest of the patients and staff in a hospice day-unit, for instance, can be a heart-warming occasion as well. But Hunt, as well as Thompson and Bolton, are adamant that this is not the same as publishing these writings: "A sense that these booklets should reach a wider public, or that writings could be published nationally, is NOT useful for this kind of writing" (Bolton 1999, p. 136). This brings us to the heart of the paradox that we outlined earlier: the fact that TW advice occupies such a prominent part of JKP's catalog and community-building strategy nonetheless reinforces the idea that therapeutic writings are a legitimate genre after all. After all, in JKP's vision, patients/readers can become authors and/or therapists, and can even achieve star status within this field, as the example of "autie-biographical" author Donna Williams, illustrated (see Van Goidsenhoven and Masschelein 2017).

Moreover, as Wandor pointed out in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, the popularity of TW has led to a curious reversal in which TW advice has become increasingly indistinguishable from CW. This is not only due to the low quality of CW handbooks, as Wandor suggests, but also to the rising prominence of autobiographical and non-fictional creative forms as legitimate points of entry into the literary field, wherein we see literary advice manuals closely following these new trends.<sup>19</sup> Unlike Wandor and Kuhl, we do not propose that this phenomenon is in itself is deplorable. If we do see a tendency toward uniformity and standardization in narrative patterns at the commercial end of the offer of illness narratives, we also observe that the genre itself is developing and diversifying, bringing new voices to the fore, which greatly diverge from the previous self-help discourse, in the direction of activism, crip theory, or more experimental forms of creative non-fiction, rooted not only in



autobiographical forms of writing, but also in artistic and qualitative research practices.<sup>20</sup>

For this reason, it is valuable to draw attention to other feedback loops, apart from those of the self-help discourse that has become intertwined with therapeutic discourse: Relations between reading and writing, between writing and research, between different domains of writing as a strategy of inquiry, survival and emancipation, and the market. Therefore, as Illouz puts it, when looking at TW handbooks, it is important to momentarily suspend judgment, in order “to understand how they have come to be what they are and why, in being what they are, they accomplish things for people” (Illouz 2008, p. 4).

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## NOTES

1. “Self Writing” is part of a series of studies of “the arts of oneself,” or “the aesthetics of existence and the government of oneself and of others in Greco-Roman culture” (Foucault 1997, p. 207). Foucault examines how *hypomnemata* (a kind of individual notebook serving memory aids) and correspondence (letter writing) helped subjects to deal with emotions (e.g., anger, envy, gossip, flatter) or to overcome difficult circumstance (e.g., grief, exile, ruin, disgrace) (ibid., pp. 209–210). In Foucault’s account, writing and drafting raw material helps the writer to shape her life.
2. Several scholars have voiced the need for a general conceptual framework to ground therapeutic writing (Nicolls 2009; Hunt and Sampson 1998; Sampson 2004). There are a few valuable attempts to give an overview of the research literature across disciplines (Wright and Chung 2001; Williamson and Wright 2018), and to unravel the plethora of different terms and interpretative frameworks (Clift et al. 2009; Cox et al. 2010; Raw et al. 2012).
3. In their overview of the field, Wright and Chung (2001) speak of a continuum between a “mastery” and a “mystery” approach. Swinnen (2016) also makes a distinction between two types of publications, where one type is more interested in psychology, methodology, and measuring impact, while the other type is more interested in experiences and creativity.

4. Smyth et al. (1999) directed a similar study, but with a focus on journal writing and physiological symptomatology. Ryle (2004) and Prasko et al. (2009) conducted studies about journal and letter writing in the context of Cognitive Analytic Therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.
5. Depending on the framework in which the concept is used, "creativity" can denote a product, process, or a skill. Often, authors differentiate between Creativity with a capital C, the exceptional achievements of artists, scientists, and "small c creativity," i.e., psychological skills rooted in everyday activities. In the field of therapeutic writing, creativity is interpreted as part of psychological growth, and the effects of engaging in creative practices are understood as beneficial for one's quality of life and well-being (Swinnen 2019, pp. 1–2).
6. Medical Humanities focuses on what the arts and humanities can offer to health care and medicine, not only in terms of improving medical education, but also by offering insight into human experiences of illness, disability, and medical interventions (Bleakley 2015, pp. 12–59, Evans 2002; Brody 2011). Through a range of creative, arts-based interventions, they aim to affirm personhood and redress the biomedical focus on deficit and loss.
7. Narrative Medicine, a term introduced by M. D. Rita Charon, is defined as "a clinical intervention based on a specific communicative competence a fundamental tool to acquire, comprehend and integrate the different points of view of all the participants having a role in the illness experience" (Fioretti et al. 2016, p. 8). Narrative Medicine is mainly involved in re-orienting medical education. In order to improve the narrative skills of physicians, Narrative Medicine draws on methods such as close reading of literature and reflective writing, based on the assumption that literary competence can improve empathy (Charon 2001, p. 1897).
8. See Moskowitz (2001), Furedi (2003), Madsen (2014) and Wright (2011). Wright (2011) and Eva Illouz (2008) try to avoid the overemphasis of the pernicious effects of therapeutic culture, in order to provide a more nuanced explanation of the triumph of therapeutic culture.
9. The therapeutic discourse and its objects (like TW handbooks) are imbued with the Western notion of "healing." For a more nuanced, critical and vexed claim of "healing" in the context of illness and disability, we like to refer to Eli Clare's *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (2017), a "writing mosaic" (xv) in which he uses his own experiences, multi-branched pattern of histories and ideas and critical analysis to explore the many meanings of "cure," "healing" and "fixed bodyminds."
10. This community-building based on intimate issues and sentimental rhetoric adds up to what Lauren Berlant in *The Female Complaint* has called "intimate publics" of readers/consumers, i.e., a sense of community "constituted by strangers who consume common texts and things"

- (Berlant 2008, p. viii), in which they participate in diverse forms of suffering and fantasies of transcendence.
11. This is the online classification on the JKP website. The printed catalog of 2019 is slightly different in terms of categorization.
  12. In fact, the entire JKP catalog is dominated by quest narratives, but in some sub-catalogs, like that of autism, the quest is supplemented by the triumph narrative. A triumph plot implies a happy ending and achieving an idea of “normality” (Couser 2001, pp. 79–80).
  13. Lists are made out of directive assignments as: “Choose a peaceful time with at least 20 minutes UNINTERPUTED, and ALONE” (Bolton 2014, p. 33).
  14. Thompson even refers to James Pennebaker’s work, an exponent of the experimental paradigm (Thompson 2011, pp. 26–27).
  15. Examples of structured (and thus safe and controlled) techniques are, for instance, prompts for overcoming the first blank page (e.g., answering question, completing sentences, making a dialogue with the notebook), making lists, drawing a mind map, making acrostics and alpha poems. Examples of freer techniques are journal dialogues (i.e., imagined dialogues with the journal itself, or with other people, an illness, or an object), unsent letters (writing a letter to someone or something), and changing perspective (rewriting the narrative from another viewpoint or character).
  16. The latter group receives markedly more attention than in other advice books. Thompson mentions for instance “working with (people with) low levels of literacy,” or “working with people who are unable to write” (Thompson 2011, pp. 192–193).
  17. For instance: *Overcoming the Block by Freewriting* (Hunt 2000, p. 20), *The Words to Say it: Dramatizing Real Events using Dialogue* (ibid., p. 29), and *Melody of Two Voices: Creating a Fictional First-Person Narrative* (ibid., p. 31).
  18. The importance of Karen Horney’s psychoanalytic theory is motivated by an emphasis on the present, seeking to explain psychic phenomena in terms of their function within the present character structure, whereas classical Freudian theory is diachronic, explaining the present in terms of the past (Hunt 2000, pp. 64, 159). Hunt’s later work (which is not published with JKP) focuses more on a bodily felt-sense approach, based on neurophysiological, psychodynamic, and cognitive models of the self (Hunt 2006, 2010).
  19. In McGurl’s chronology of the influence of creative writing on postwar American phase, the phase subsumed under the maxim “Find your own voice!” occurs more or less in the 1970s and 1980s and is concomitant to the rise of identity politics (McGurl 2009, Chapter 4).

20. Seminal essays on writing as inquiry are “Writing: A Methods of Inquiry” (2005) by Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth St Pierre and “Working at the Wonder: Collaborative Writing as Method of Inquiry” (2017), by Ken Gale and Jonathan Wyatt. In his most recent book, *Therapy, Stand-Up, and the Gesture of Writing* (2018), Wyatt is exploring the possible connections between therapy, stand-up comedy and writing as a method of inquiry. He theorizes these connections with the concept of “creative-relational inquiry.” Other researchers working on this topic are Norman Denzin, Caroline Ellis, Bronwyn Davies, and Jasmin Ulmer.

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PART III

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Adopting and Resisting Literary Advice  
Culture



# Reproduction as Literary Production: Self-Expression and the Index in Kenneth Goldsmith's *Uncreative Writing*

*Ioannis Tsitsovits*

## INTRODUCTION

How big a liability is self-expression for contemporary writing? Through what kinds of techniques could one attempt to stifle it? Viewed from a certain angle, the work of Kenneth Goldsmith confronts writing instruction with some thought-provoking questions. For the better part of his career, the self-proclaimed conceptual writer has mounted a sustained effort to countervail the emphasis on creativity, authenticity, and a personal voice that he considers the defining trait of today's literary world. The evidence of this antagonism is manifold. To start with, there is Goldsmith's output itself: most emblematically, his 840-page tome *Day* (2003), a word-for-word retyping of the September 1, 2000 issue of the *New York Times* (including advertising copy), or his "New York trilogy," a book series made up of radio broadcast transcripts.<sup>1</sup> There is the titular antipathy of *Against Expression* (2011), an anthology of conceptual

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A. Masschelein and D. de Geest (eds.), *Writing Manuals  
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writing which, his co-editor Craig Dworkin claims, avoids “familiar strategies of authorial control in favor of automatism, reticence, obliquity, and modes of noninterference” (Dworkin 2011, pp. xliii-xliv). Finally, there is *Uncreative Writing* (2011), a publication that is equal parts primer, manifesto, and literary advice. Probably Goldsmith’s most explicitly pedagogical text, the book includes a reckoning with the Uncreative Writing course he has been teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, alongside insights on the authors he regards as his conceptual peers and predecessors. As such, it proffers both a rationale for his own *modus operandi* and certain answers to the questions which began this paragraph.

From its opening pages, in fact, it becomes clear that the overarching argument in *Uncreative Writing* is underpinned by a McLuhanesque logic of media determinism. Among the most profound ramifications ushered in by digital technology and the worldwide web, Goldsmith notes, is the sheer excess of the written word: “faced with an unprecedented amount of available text, the problem is not needing to write more of it; instead, we must learn to negotiate the vast quantity that exists” (Goldsmith 2011, p. 1). Literature, he says, has reached a crossroads similar to that encountered by painting after the advent of photography. In the wake of the myriad possibilities for textual manipulation that have emerged in the last decades, the trappings of traditional literariness—among them self-expression, lyricism, immersive narrative, and plot—hold less importance than one’s ability to manage and disseminate information. Correspondingly, we have witnessed “an explosion of writers employing strategies of copying and appropriation over the past few years, with the computer encouraging writers to mimic its workings” (*ibid.*, p. 5). Part of the purpose of *Against Expression* and *Uncreative Writing* is to give pedagogically accessible contours to this explosion, while also laying claim to its genealogical precursors. Indeed, next to writings by Gertrude Stein and Andy Warhol, these books showcase and contextualize an often digitally enabled gamut of textual collage, appropriation, and constraint-based practices, such as those found in the projects of Tan Lin, Vanessa Place, and Thomas Claburn. Despite such work, however, Goldsmith insists that today’s literature is largely shutting itself off from a wider cultural milieu that is “embracing the digital and all the complexity it entails” (*ibid.*, p. 7). Instead of drawing on these recent technological innovations to renew itself, he says, literature remains “mostly wedded to promoting an authentic and stable identity at all costs” (*ibid.*).

Crucially, Goldsmith singles out creative writing pedagogy as a potential culprit for this lag. Writing handbooks come under especially acerbic scrutiny: “In regard to the many sophisticated ideas concerning media, identity, and sampling developed over the past century,” he ventures, “books about how to be a creative writer have completely missed the boat, relying on clichéd notions of what it means to be ‘creative’” (ibid.). Goldsmith’s indictment resonates with recent essays that criticize the literary advice industry on fairly similar grounds. Stretching from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first, Michelene Wandor’s survey of writing handbooks, for instance, highlights their bias toward exercises “drawing on personal, real-life experiences,” a habit which “over-privileges the personal and fetish[iz]es the autobiographical” (Wandor 2008, p. 110). Nancy Kuhl has likewise warned of the counterproductive promotion of “writing-as-self-exploration,” exemplified by books such as Julia Cameron’s 1992 bestseller *The Artist’s Way* (Kuhl 2005, p. 7). For Kuhl, such guides are symptomatic of a pervasive and ultimately deleterious confusion of writing with soul searching and psychotherapy, especially in North American popular culture. Even Alexandria Peary’s more sympathetic take on “the informal aesthetic education of writers,” as she calls it, effectively treats writing handbooks as subsidiary to the self-help industry, with their implied diktat “Go inward, writer” being a call for “self-engagement” (see Peary in this volume). One attribute of literary advice that all these studies point to, whether approvingly or critically, is its tendency to present writing as a route to self-discovery and personal development.

However, while these criticisms and those leveled by Goldsmith lock onto the same target, they are respectively launched from quite different positions. Unlike the academic texts mentioned above, *Uncreative Writing* is a book providing literary advice in its own right. In this sense, it performs what is here taken as the genre’s principal function, which is to advocate models of literary production. More specifically, the model Goldsmith espouses in *Uncreative Writing* is introduced as an aesthetic antidote of sorts; it is a model that implies the ideological infiltration or correction of a literary field in which, as Wandor puts it, “the quest is for the writer beneath the work, not the work itself” (Wandor 2008, p. 111). This allows Goldsmith to present his counter-model as a much-needed alternative or remedy which, in the context of his technologically inflected argument, stakes a claim for its contemporary

relevance. Furthermore, several critics have aligned themselves with Goldsmith's self-appraisal. Marjorie Perloff, for example, echoes him when she argues that his work is premised on the malleability of language "in a digital environment" (Perloff 2010, p. 164), while Jeffrey Nealon sees his conceptualism both as a rejection of "affective capitalism" and as a kind of 2.0 version of postmodern anti-interpretive critiques (Nealon 2017, p. 78).

Taking a somewhat different approach, this article examines *Uncreative Writing*'s pedagogy in connection to a history of indexical artistic practices and of copying as a form of literary advice. As I argue below, Goldsmith's writing exercises can best be understood as the deployment of a principle of indexicality through which Rosalind Krauss read the emergent art of the 1970s, and which according to her thesis underlies not only analog photography, but Duchamp's readymades and the grammatical category of the shifter. In this sense, Goldsmith's advice expands a proto-photographic logic into the territory of contemporary literature. I explain, moreover, how the practice of copying at the heart of his project is, in fact, part of traditional self-expressive literary advice. I illustrate that point by way of R. V. Cassill's *Writing Fiction* (1962), contending that the writing exercises in *Uncreative Writing* are no less "wedded to promoting an authentic and stable identity" than Cassill's pedagogical approach. Whereas in Cassill this promotion is linked to the assimilation of copying into an imitative process, in Goldsmith it follows an indexical and therefore less evidently self-expressive logic. In the final section of the article, I consider what kind of subjectivity might be expressed through Goldsmith's model, concluding with an brief assessment of the role of *Uncreative Writing* in terms of both its educational and polemic functions.

## EXERCISES IN UNCREATIVITY

*Uncreative Writing* borrows its title from the class that Goldsmith has been teaching for over fifteen years at the University of Pennsylvania. "In it," he explains, "students are penalized for showing any shred of originality and creativity" (Goldsmith 2011, p. 8). In the chapter that offers an account of his educational practices, Goldsmith lists the following five writing exercises as part of his pedagogical approach: "Retyping Five Pages," "Transcribing a Short Piece of Audio," "Transcribing Project Runway," "Retro Graffiti," and "Screenplays." With the exception of

“Screenplays,” which involves scripting pedantically precise screenplays for films or video clips, none of these exercises require any linguistic input from his students (or readers) for their completion and would actually seem to discourage such initiatives. “Retro Graffiti,” for instance, simply entails the public display (or insinuation into public space) of “arcane texts or out-of-date slogans,” while “Transcribing Project Runway” is the product of his students’ simultaneous transcription, over Internet chat, of an episode of the reality TV series *Project Runway* (ibid., p. 210). As a first observation, then, we could say that these tasks broadly signal a refusal to produce new verbal content. In keeping with Goldsmith’s practice and conceptual writing as a whole, literary production is reduced to a series of activities for repurposing, recording, or reframing language.

As Goldsmith’s exercises show, his writing model is not necessarily tied to the use of state-of-the-art technology: “Retyping Five Pages,” “Retro Graffiti,” and “Transcribing a Short Piece of Audio” could easily dispense with the internet or a laptop altogether. Several critics have, in fact, addressed the apparent incongruity of Goldsmith’s touting of the contemporary vitality of his work when, from a technical point of view, his project is comparatively old-fashioned. David Kaufmann, for example, remarks that while the Internet might have made Goldsmith’s output easier, not one of his books “depends for its actual existence on the Web” (Kaufmann 2017, p. 19). The exercises listed in *Uncreative Writing* nonetheless suggest that conceptual writing, at least as Goldsmith understands and practices it, rests on a formal rather than technological disposition. Paul Stephens has characterized the strategies used in conceptual writing as “passive indexing” (Stephens 2015, p. 154). As he argues, such literary practices suggest an interest in “the bureaucratic forms taken by large quantities of information,” frequently producing works that “themmatize in some manner the relation of a writer to a data set”—hence the “parodic compendia” that are exemplary of the genre (ibid.). Although, as we will see, the index is a helpful concept for approaching Goldsmith’s work, Stephens’s terms tend to circumscribe it within the area of information systems and Big Data. With the exception of “Transcribing Project Runway,” the logic of the database is not necessarily an accurate blueprint for the repertoire of writing exercises in *Uncreative Writing*.

Craig Dworkin has used the term “interface” to describe conceptual writing’s formal disposition, which often operates, as he puts it, by “returning the answer to a particular query; assembling, rearranging, and displaying information; or sorting and selecting from files of accumulated

language pursuant to a certain algorithm – rather than producing new material from scratch” (Dworkin 2011, p. xlii). He consequently argues that “[e]ven if it does not involve electronics or computers, conceptual poetry is thus very much a part of its technological and cultural moment” (ibid.). Framing the practice in this way is, on the one hand, a means of pre-empting criticisms such as Kaufmann’s. On the other hand, Dworkin’s definition casts its net wider than it may seem. Thinking of “algorithm” simply as a formula for ordering the appropriation of words from existing verbal matter opens the door to a chronologically flexible conception of conceptual writing. His comments consequently can also be read as a legitimization of the protracted genealogy of the genre, which in *Against Expression* and *Uncreative Writing* extends back well beyond the information age. This elasticity enables Goldsmith to position his own work within a pliant lineage that not only includes the writings of Duchamp and Andy Warhol but those of Jacques Diderot and Stéphane Mallarmé, and therefore to participate in his own canonization.

Yet what if we also approached Stephens’s notion of indexing with a broader chronology in mind? A pivotal reference point for *Against Expression* and *Uncreative Writing* is the conceptual art of the late 1960s and 1970s: Sol LeWitt’s wall drawings and writings in particular come into special prominence in Goldsmith’s book. As Stephens acknowledges, these art practices set an important precedent for the indexical logic he is attempting to map out. However, his analysis leaves out a milestone in the theorization of this logic as it manifests itself in that art, namely Rosalind Krauss’s 1977 essay “Notes on the Index.” One merit of Krauss’s extraordinary text is that it offers a theoretically rigorous understanding of the index that does not limit itself to a narrow chronological period. So although she sets out to explain the principles uniting the apparent heterogeneity of the new art of the time, her art-historical departure point is the oeuvre of Duchamp, in which she sees a proto-photographic quality. What the photograph and Duchamp’s work have in common with the 1970s art in her purview, she argues, is their adherence to the logic of the index. Indexes—a semiotic category which, she says, includes footprints, medical symptoms, and cast shadows—“are the marks or traces of a particular cause, and that cause is the thing to which they refer” (Krauss 1977, p. 70).<sup>2</sup> The reason both the photograph and the readymade are indexical, according to Krauss, has to do with their mode of production: “It is about the physical transposition of an object from

the continuum of reality into the fixed condition of the art-image by a moment of isolation, or selection” (ibid., p. 78).

### THE LOGIC OF THE INDEX

With some reworking, an equivalent statement could be made about Goldsmith’s model of literary production. It is a model, we could say, that involves the transposition of a slice of verbal matter from the vast quantity surrounding us into the fixed condition of a textual object by a moment of isolation, or selection. Of course, while analog photography is typically considered an exemplary indexical medium, the suggestion that writing might function as an index—other than in the obvious sense of its indexical relation to the means (the pen, keystrokes, printer, etc.) by which it was inscribed—might appear somewhat odd.<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting, however, that the concept of the shifter through which Krauss launches her analysis is not borrowed from art history or photography, but from linguistics.<sup>4</sup> Shifters, she writes, include pronouns and demonstratives such as “this”—words which despite being “part of the symbolic code of language” are indexes because “their meaning depends on the existential presence of a given speaker” (ibid., p. 70). Like the readymade and the photograph, the shifter is therefore “a sign which is inherently ‘empty,’” a “meaningless meaning that is instituted through the terms of the index” (ibid., p. 78). As Mary Ann Doane observes in her 2007 reading of Krauss’s essay, this argument entails “no tension between the index as [material] trace and the deictic index; both involve the sheer affirmation of an existence” (Doane 2007, p. 3).<sup>5</sup>

This understanding of the index, it seems to me, provides a useful way of grasping Goldsmith’s writing pedagogy that moves beyond the notion of a passive indexing tied to “the forms taken by the bureaucratic mechanisms of contemporary capitalism” (Stephens), or an interface eschewing the production of “new material from scratch” (Dworkin). Consider, for instance, the “Screenplays” exercise, which technically speaking *does* implicate the creation of new writing from scratch. “Take a film or video that has no screenplay,” Goldsmith instructs, “and make one for it, so precisely notated that it could be recreated after the fact by actors or nonactors” (Goldsmith 2011, p. 211). In addition, its format “should have nothing left to chance or whim about it,” but instead should “adhere to the preordained formatting constraints that are the screenwriting industry standards” (ibid.). As a recipe for text-making, the



exercise aspires to a logic that is fundamentally indexical: it aspires, that is, to a condition in which the writing merely registers the presence of an object, which in this instance happens to be visual rather than verbal. The apparent purpose of the task's prescriptive pedantry is to reduce its outcome to a deictic affirmation of the film or video's existence. In this way, "Screenplays" is kept in line with the character of the other assignments.

What Krauss in her analysis refers to as the "meaningless meaning" of the shifter and the photograph also sheds further light on Goldsmith's practice. For instance, in the case of *Day*, his newspaper retyping project, Krauss's oxymoron can be understood in terms of the subordination of the *New York Times's* descriptive, propositional content—what, borrowing from speech act theory, we would call its constative component—to the performance of its textual reproduction. As Doane also remarks about the indexical artworks Krauss examines in her essay: "[they] simply register their world, taking on the form of performative evidence rather than constative statement" (Doane 2007, pp. 3–4). A similar claim could be made about Goldsmith's writing exercises. "Retro Graffiti" is an obvious concretization of this principle. In most responses to the exercise, the meaning of the appropriated phrases was subsumed under the task's performative character: one student, for example, memorably inscribed part of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) in tiny letters on the skin of a banana and placed it in a fruit bowl. Yet even in the case of a less obviously stunt-like exercise such as "Retyping Five Pages" the overall effect is the demotion of the text's signification, its consignment to the status of performative evidence. It is quite telling that, as Goldsmith writes, classroom discussions of the "Retyping Five Pages" exercise revolve around its deictic affirmation of another text ("the choice of *what* to retype"), its performative function (some students "find the task unbearable"; "others discover that it is relaxing and Zen-like"; one student "says she finds the exercise closer to dancing than to writing"), or the form this function takes, including the various "paratextual devices" through which the assignment is embodied or presented (Goldsmith 2011, pp. 202–203). The task, in other words, is both structured and framed as an indexical operation.

There are several reasons why the indexicality Goldsmith espouses might be of interest to an anti-expressive program. For one, his writing protocols could be considered anti-expressive in the broader sense of their restrictive impact on an author's compositional input. In addition,

because it posits writing as a means of copying, recording, or transcribing pre-existing material, Goldsmith's model short-circuits the prerequisite of an originary voice that frequently sustains the ideal of self-expression. Another factor, related to the previous ones, is the indexical demotion of the constative: adhering primarily to a deictic rather than propositional or descriptive principle, Goldsmith's writing assignments seem ill-suited to an exploration of an author's thoughts or psychological states. Despite the putative anti-expressive effects of such restrictions, however, recalling the performative bias of these tasks should be enough to make one realize that curbing self-expression is not an easy or straightforward project.

It is interesting, in that regard, to consider the kind of writing that is generated when it relies on looser indexical parameters than those of Goldsmith's exercises. One example is his *Capital* (2015), a text made up entirely of quotes from books on New York City. It is revealing that a work Goldsmith describes in fairly expressive terms—its “function,” he explains, is “to give a completely poetic and subjective view of the way one person might find his way through the mass of literature written about the capital of the twentieth century, New York” (cited in Perloff 2010, p. 168)—should also conform to a less rigorous indexicality. Modeled on Walter Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project* (1927–1940), *Capital* is the product of a permutational arrangement that allows us to speak of its composition in a way that would not be as plausible for *Day*, or for the exercises featured in *Uncreative Writing*.

And yet, as Jennifer Ashton has recently remarked, Goldsmith's suggestion of *Capital*'s expressive function “is simply to make explicit a logic that has been implicit all along” (Ashton 2018, p. 227). This logic turns around the notion of the author's choices, both in the selection of the cited or appropriated text and the implied or stated rules by which a writer reproduces it. Such choices, moreover, cannot help but register the author's personal predilections. In other words, not only is it possible for a work like *Capital* to be self-expressive, it is impossible for Goldsmith's writing model as a whole *not* to be self-expressive. Reflecting on the “Transcribe a Short Piece of Audio” assignment, for example, Goldsmith writes: “How we hear – and how, in turn, we process that hearing into written language – is riddled with subjectivity. What you hear as a brief pause and transcribe as a comma, I hear as the end of a sentence and transcribe as a period” (Goldsmith 2011, p. 205). Similar

observations can be made about the other writing exercises.<sup>6</sup> As Goldsmith freely acknowledges in his book's introduction, "the suppression of self-expression is impossible" (*ibid.*, p. 9).

The entire rationale of the indexical curtailment of authorial expression thus inevitably inverts and ends up homing in on the persona of the author. This reversal is also thrown into relief by the realization that, by valorizing writing as performative evidence, indexicality actually fosters self-expression—something that Goldsmith's exercises make abundantly clear. Yet where does this leave Goldsmith's antagonism to the kind of literary advice that advocates "a stable and authentic identity"? I will be returning to this question in what follows. Before doing so, however, it is worth noting that the primary vehicle through which Goldsmith endeavors to set his model apart from such advice (i.e., the use of textual reproduction as a writing process) is also integrated in explicitly self-expressive "how-to" guides. How, then, would a traditional self-expressive writing handbook rationalize the inclusion of copying in its repertoire of exercises? And what might this tell us about Goldsmith's own endeavor?

### SELF-EXPRESSION VIA COPYING VS. COPYING AS SELF-EXPRESSION

On the face of it, R. V. Cassill's *Writing Fiction* is one of those "terribly unsophisticated" "how-to" books that are dismissed in *Uncreative Writing* (*ibid.*, p. 8). In an early chapter titled "Choosing a Subject" Cassill warns of the temptation "to turn from concentration on our own experience to the public world of great events – to write about spies and congressmen" (Cassill 1962, p. 23). Instead, "the first commandment is to go back stubbornly to our own fields. This time – and the next time and the time after that – we must turn them more deeply than before" (*ibid.*). This commitment to harnessing the personal is then collapsed into the following plea: "In the long run the reward for this may only be that the writer will discover who he really is" (*ibid.*). Reading like a paean to self-expression, Cassill's passage takes as its starting point a shopworn principle of literary advice (the equivalent of "write what you know"), only to put it in the service of an imperative to explore and find one's genuine self. It should be added that his pedagogical approach is firmly rooted in classroom instruction: in the first sentence of the book, Cassill announces that it is "the summary of what I have said in the last twelve years to my classes in fiction writing" (*ibid.*, p. xi). What is more,

during 1948–1952 and 1960–1966 Cassill taught at The Iowa Writers’ Workshop (Sage 1974, p. 262). Readers acquainted with the Workshop’s history will already know that this background carries a considerable institutional weight. Even in the diversifying realm of today’s creative writing programs, the name of the Iowa Workshop—“the most influential linking of an educational institution with literary production ever” (McGurl 2007, p. 527)—remains associated with a writing model that is paradigmatically self-expressive.<sup>7</sup>

To all appearances, then, it would be hard to reconcile Cassill’s advice with that offered in *Uncreative Writing*. Besides the shared fact of their origins in classroom teaching, the two books seem to have precious little in common. Nevertheless, Cassill’s traditional and fully institutionalized “how-to” guide also embraces textual reproduction as part of its regime of writing exercises. Although he favors emulation over “mechanical borrowing or stealing” and warns his readers that “[w]riting is not just typewriting” (Cassill 1962, p. 3)—a claim in direct conflict with a work like Goldsmith’s *Day*—Cassill recognizes the literary benefits of “outright copying or imitation” (*ibid.*, p. 6). In a subsequent section, he recommends that readers reproduce the last two pages of a story printed in its entirety in *Writing Fiction*. This act of textual cloning is merely offered as a “finger exercise,” a means to another end rather than proper literary work. In principle, however, Cassill’s copying task is identical to the “Retyping Five Pages” assignment in *Uncreative Writing*. From this perspective, it is tempting to regard the process of producing *Day* as an oversized rendition of what has for some time now been a simple and uncontroversial piece of literary advice.

Even more surprising, however, given his earlier self-expressive imperative, is Cassill’s theoretical justification of the copying exercise, which posits literary production as inherently derivative:

If I have begun by advocating some rather dry and mechanical forms of imitation, let me conclude by saying that imitation shades very gradually into all works that we properly think of as original. There cannot be, and probably there should never be, any piece of fiction that does not derive from other literary works, though the connections between one piece and whatever served as a model may be infinitely subtle and varied. (*ibid.*, p. 56)

Were we to isolate the first part of his second sentence, replacing “fiction” with “conceptual writing,” and “literary works” with “verbal matter,” we would essentially extract a recipe for Goldsmith’s practice. All the same, Cassill’s conception of original literature as the offshoot of mimetic processes—a proposition going at least as far back as Voltaire’s pronouncement that “originality is nothing but judicious imitation” (1786, p. 410)—suggests a very different take on the utility of textual reproduction. Cassill treats copying as a stepping stone, something that ultimately paves the way to self-expressive writing. For Goldsmith, in contrast, copying *is* the writing: from the point of view of pedagogy, this is all an aspiring writer needs to learn in order to start working. The rift between these methodologies becomes obvious when considering the fact that Cassill also instructs his readers to perform the copying exercise without keeping their eyes on the source text. They are encouraged, instead, to test their memory for the composition of sentences and paragraphs, and to hone their “sensitivity to style” so as to utilize their “memory of language and its resources in various combinations” (Cassill 1962, pp. 55–56). In *Writing Fiction* copying is not performed for its own sake, as it is in *Uncreative Writing*; rather, textual reproduction evolves into the imitative assimilation of other writers’ styles.

From the point of view of Cassill’s book, then, Goldsmith’s model might seem to endorse a literary equivalent of arrested development, an embryonic form of writing that never makes it to the self-expressive stage, let alone to an intermediary imitative one. Conversely, we might look at Goldsmith’s work as, precisely, a strategy for foreclosing this development and keeping the indexicality of textual reproduction unsullied by mimesis. Goldsmith’s project is actually far more successful in halting this mimetic process than it is at stymying self-expression. Indeed, given that the indexicality of Goldsmith’s model ends up foregrounding the author’s subjectivity, as we saw, the variance between Goldsmith’s and Cassill’s literary advice is not really a question of whether they promote a self-expressive model or not (they both do), but of the different ways in which they implicate copying in a self-expressive process. This is the difference, respectively, between copying as self-expression and self-expression via copying. Yet, in the case of Cassill’s model, the horizon of the self that is expressed is obvious even if it is vague: it is the self through which “the writer will discover who he really is.” What kind of self would Goldsmith’s model lead his readers to express?

## LITERARY ADVICE FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?

In its paradoxical tracing of the origins of originality to its putative antithesis, to copying and mimesis, Cassill's model evokes a parallel to the term "unoriginal genius." This expression is used by Marjorie Perloff, one of conceptual writing's most conspicuous champions, to refer to figures such as Goldsmith; Goldsmith himself reiterates the term in his stated ambition to teach his students to be "unoriginal geniuses" (Goldsmith 2011, p. 217). For the critic John Douglas Millar, the contradictory implications of this phrase encapsulate "a complex dialectical relation between Romanticism and Conceptualism" that also marks LeWitt's critical writings (Millar 2016, p. 41).<sup>8</sup> As a term, "unoriginal genius" certainly speaks volumes of the way in which the author's subjectivity and persona ultimately take center stage in Goldsmith's practice. What rings particularly true is Perloff's observation that "however unoriginal its actual words and phrases," Goldsmith's appropriative work boils down to a question of "individual taste" (Perloff 2010, pp. 168–169). The "genius" of such unoriginality, to put it in the indexical terms of Goldsmith's project, would thus depend on the distinctiveness with which the deictic traces of this individual taste are realized as performative evidence. This is the crux of copying as self-expression. Needless to say, it is a model that promotes identities which, in their own way, are no less "stable and authentic" than those encouraged by the old-fashioned literary advice of Cassill's *Writing Fiction*.

Ashton makes a related point when she observes that Goldsmith's program actualizes a transition from textual production to textual consumption. Citing Dworkin's warning that the contemporary growth rate of poetry publications "faces a Malthusian limit," she notes that "the utility of a 'consumerist poetics' is in at least one respect – that of the market itself – the logical outcome of a literary surplus" (Ashton 2018, p. 231). One way of solving the Malthusian crisis, then, is to fall back on "the desires of the reader/consumer," "the realm of 'individual choice'" (ibid.). These insights give a slightly different slant to Goldsmith's proclamation that aspiring writers "must learn to negotiate the vast quantity" of texts that are already out there. In light of the above, a big part of their training as "unoriginal geniuses" would pivot less on their being the negotiators of this surplus than its keen-eyed consumers.

Kaufmann, in fact, views Goldsmith's practice in a strikingly similar way, positioning it on a spectrum that straddles his activities as founder

and curator of UbuWeb (a well-known online archive of vanguard art and literature), his “hiply retro” fashion sense, and a persona that “elides the distinctions between the collector, the artist and the aesthete” (Kaufmann 2017, pp. 2, 18). Hence what Kaufmann describes as Goldsmith’s own “transmediations”—by dint of which “[n]ewspapers, television news, radio reports become books, and more importantly, [...] art” (ibid., pp. 19–20)—are treated as an extension of a broader curatorial project. Kaufmann does not factor photography into his assessment—and, of course, given that it is a medium that Goldsmith’s work is not especially concerned with, there seems no need for him to do so. Yet the indexical formulas that structure Goldsmith’s curatorial impulse follow a proto-photographic logic: as Susan Sontag was at pains to highlight in her essays on photography, photographs “do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire” (Sontag 1977, p. 4). Here we get an inkling not only of the deprivileging of the constative that seems integral to indexical operations, but of their “transposition of an object from the continuum of reality” as a kind of performance of consumption.

We can envision how this performance might take place by revisiting Goldsmith’s writing exercises. Both Cassill and Goldsmith rationalize textual reproduction as, among other things, a species of absorbed readerly engagement. “Copying obliges you to read all the words,” Cassill writes (1962, p. 55), while Goldsmith recounts how a student found the “Retyping Five Pages” exercise to be “the most intense *reading* experience she’s ever had” (Goldsmith 2011, p. 153). Yet while for Cassill this engagement lays the necessary groundwork for assimilating style, in Goldsmith’s case it is not vital to the task of literary reproduction: Goldsmith explains for instance that, in order to produce *Day*, he used OCR software to automatically transcribe as much of the *New York Times* issue as possible. Even if it ostensibly prescribes faithful retyping, the “Retyping Five Pages” exercise could just as plausibly be done without really engaging with the target text—for instance, through copy-pasting or, indeed, photographing it. Executing the task could in this sense be said to imitate a process of performative consumption.

Once we consider the indexicality of Goldsmith’s writing model in these terms, links start to emerge between his practice and certain patterns of performativity in the digital sphere. Jeffrey Nealon has remarked that, because it resists lyricism and “artistic hermeneutics,” Goldsmith’s work suggests “one strategy for dealing with the colonization of everyday life

by the increasing saturation of affective capitalism – which no longer just wants you to produce for it from nine to five; it wants you to prosume (produce through consumption), and it wants you to do it 24/7” (Nealon 2017, p. 78). Nonetheless, in their staging of performative consumption, the writing exercises offered in *Uncreative Writing* mimic the prosumer model that Nealon is referring to. Understood as “the use of digital network technologies, in which creation and consumption of the mediated content take place simultaneously and are performed by the same persons,” this model is abundantly familiar to participants in the so-called gift economy (Zajc 2015, p. 31). While they of course also prompt the production and sharing of new content, many social media platforms provide arenas for simply showcasing already existing digital material. Such acts of reproduction not only function as performative evidence of the users’ taste and personal choices; they operate according to a deictic principle that is essentially indexical. In short, these kinds of platforms exemplify the way in which, as Doane remarks, “the digital has not annihilated the logic of the photochemical, but incorporated it” (Doane 2007, p. 5). The fact that Goldsmith’s output would appear to resonate with digital culture is, by the same token, less to do with his engagement with the digital sphere per se than with that sphere’s assimilation of traditional indexical principles.

Stephens argues that, by virtue of its policy of passive indexing, “conceptual writing demonstrates considerable self-reflexivity with respect to the conditions of its own existence and dissemination in an era of instantaneous global information flows” (Stephens 2015, p. 154). However, Goldsmith’s model does not really engage in a critique or exploration of these conditions, but expands into the realm of writing a “desire for a photographic logic [that] has only been intensified by the emergence of the digital” (Doane 2007, p. 5). Or, to frame this in the terms of Goldsmith’s own analogy to painting: rather than being a writerly response to the emergence of the Internet that corresponds to modern painting’s reaction to photography, his literary advice merely extends a proto-photographic logic into the territory of contemporary literature. Through this extension, Goldsmith furnishes aspiring authors with ideas for tapping into an indexical approach to writing. Even if the principle of copying it hinges on has been a longstanding ingredient of literary advice, his model therefore has an undeniable pedagogical utility. Whether it also points to the future of writing handbooks—let alone of literature—is nonetheless more debatable. By promoting reproduction as a form of



literary production, his book offers a valuable addition to the field of literary advice that ultimately participates in, rather than counters, the contemporary quest for authentic self-expression.

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## NOTES

1. The New York trilogy consists of *The Weather* (2005), *Traffic* (2007), and *Sports* (2008).
2. Krauss is here adapting C.S. Peirce's theorization of the index.
3. It should be mentioned that certain theorists have raised objections to the notion that photography is fundamentally indexical. See, for example, Joel Snyder's "Pointless" in *Photography Theory* (2007). While acknowledging that, as a sign, the photograph is not merely reducible to its indexicality, the current article begins from the assumption that photographs are indexical in a way that other types of cultural artifacts, such as paintings or drawings, are not.
4. Although the term "shifter" was first introduced by Otto Jespersen as early as the 1920s, it entered wider currency through Roman Jakobson's 1957 essay "Shifters, verbal categories, and the Russian verb." It is worth noting that there are parallels between Jakobson's insights and Émile Benveniste's observations on the deictic quality of personal pronouns.
5. Henri Van Lier has also highlighted what he calls the "indiciality" of the photograph's indexical quality in his *Philosophy of Photography* (2007).
6. The obvious exception is "Transcribing Project Runway": as Goldsmith notes, the show's transcription process (and subsequent editing of the transcript) is a group effort. It could nonetheless be argued that while the assignment aggregates (and thus dilutes) the students' individual transcription choices, the choice of source material expresses Goldsmith's recognizable taste for the banal and Warholesque. Strictly speaking, "Transcribing Project Runway" appears to be the least indexical of the tasks, producing rhythmical (and often inaccurate) repetitions of phrases scattered across the transcript.
7. For a discussion that acknowledges the diversity of current approaches to creative writing alongside that of the Iowa model, see Seth Abramson, "From Modernism to Metamodernism: Quantifying and Theorizing the Stages of the Program Era" (2016).

8. Millar is here drawing on Peter Osborne's critique of Sol LeWitt's conceptual art principles (see Osborne 2013, pp. 37–69).

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# Creative Writing Crosses the Atlantic: An Attempt at Creating a Minor French Literature

*Gert-Jan Meyntjens*

## INTRODUCTION

Literary advice is, it appears, an Anglo-Saxon affair par excellence.<sup>1</sup> For more than a century, countries such as the United States, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have presented extensive and varied literary advice offers, both for academic and amateur audiences (see Myers 1996; Dawson 2005; Marquis and Guy 2007; Wandor 2008). At the same time, in recent years, literary advice has increasingly crossed the borders of the English-language world (see Soukop 2011; Harper 2012, 2014). Inspired by the Anglo-American workshop model and the academic creative writing system, multiple regions in the world are witnessing a surge of literary advice, ranging from workshops to handbooks and online channels. In the European context, France represents this tendency most prominently (Grauby 2015). In spite of the nation's own longstanding *conseils* (advice) tradition and its literary prestige, local advice-makers are

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eager to integrate established methods from the overseas territories into their offers. This process of cultural transfer has been sparsely documented (Meyntjens 2018). In this chapter, I will shed light on the reception of the American poetics of creative writing in contemporary France, while focusing on *Outils du roman: Avec Malt Olbren sur les pistes et exercices du creative writing à l'américaine* (2016, *Tools of the Novel: Exploring American Creative Writing with Malt Olbren*)<sup>2</sup> by the experimental prose-writer and creative writing pioneer François Bon. This text, I argue, represents a broader dynamic in which French authors resort to a repertoire of American writing techniques in an attempt to reinvigorate French literature.

To conceptualize this dynamic I will employ Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "minor literature" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986). This choice has less to do with the concept's political dimension (which, as I will suggest, applies to the case of François Bon as well), than with the idea that a minor literature always operates in a system.<sup>3</sup> It encompasses forms of writing that, in contrast to the great literature, refuse to imitate the canonical writers as well as genres of the past which do not perpetuate what the educational system considers to be models of style and are therefore incapable of conforming to the norms of a literary market based on repetition and calculated diversification. In spite of its dissident condition, a minor literature can only germinate against the backdrop of a great literature: It depends on the stylistic, thematic, and generic conventions that constitute either the canonical or commercial great literature. Additionally, in their work, Deleuze and Guattari are less interested in the eventual creation of a specific minor literature, than in a general reflection on the conditions of such a phenomenon: "We might as well say that minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions of every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature" (ibid., p. 18). As I will show, this emphasis on conditions rather than on actual production recurs when we consider the role that American poetics of creative writing plays in the French literary system today.

Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the relation between minor and great literature should not necessarily be considered within the confines of a nation, as the case of Kafka demonstrates. In this chapter, the minor literature for which a literary advice author like François Bon creates the conditions must be considered on two levels. Firstly, in the context of mainstream literature in France, which can be understood as a body of bestselling texts and works of writers who are actively present

in French media today (such as Michel Houellebecq and the Belgian Amélie Nothomb), and who evoke criticism from experimental authors like François Bon. Secondly, it exists at the level of American cultural hegemony,<sup>4</sup> that French literary advice authors are simultaneously striving to resist. This results in an appropriation and *détournement*<sup>5</sup> of the American poetics of creative writing, that also entails a critical take on the relation between literature and the dominant narrative media of today, most importantly English-language films and television series

### CREATIVE WRITING IN FRANCE: THE ATELIER D'ÉCRITURE

In order to grasp what *Outils du roman* aims to accomplish, it is useful to very briefly outline the literary advice culture against which François Bon can be situated. Although less well-known than its American counterpart, France has a genuine literary advice tradition of its own, which can be traced back to a heterogeneous collection of texts produced during the “autonomization” of the literary field in the late nineteenth century (Bourdieu 1993; Grauby 2015; Meyntjens 2018). The canon of French literary *conseils* consists of Edmond and Jules de Goncourt’s *Journal* (1886–1896), Gustave Flaubert’s collected *Correspondance* (1887–1893) and the rhetorical handbooks of creative writing “guru” Antoine Albalat (1899–1925), all of which have consistently remained in print.<sup>6</sup> In the twentieth century, the French literary advice tradition has been profoundly marked by the rise of *ateliers d’écriture* (writing ateliers). The *atelier d’écriture* movement does not replicate the American creative writing program, but has its own ideological and literary roots in the initiatives of the “Ligue internationale pour l’éducation nouvelle,” in the writings of pedagogue and school-reformer Célestin Freinet, and in the anti-institutional thought which sparked the revolts of May 1968.<sup>7</sup>

Most of the early *ateliers d’écriture* emphasize the emancipation of the individual and the creation of an egalitarian society, rather than the technical aspects of writing. Over the course of the past decades, the movement has become institutionalized (Rossignol 1996; Chateigner 2007; Oriol-Boyer 2013). From 1980 onwards, teachers have organized themselves in organizations like “Les Ateliers d’écriture Élisabeth Bing,” “ALEPH écriture,” and the “GFEN” (Groupe français d’éducation nouvelle). These organizations each placed different emphases on

writing, from GFEN's focus on the political, to Bing's more therapeutic aims, and ALEPH's emphasis on the realization of literary ambitions. Moreover, public institutions such as high schools, prisons, and cultural associations have increasingly sought to host writing workshops. Today, the *atelier d'écriture* movement has entered the French university (Sapiro and Rabot 2017). With a small number of universities offering Master programs in *création littéraire* (literary creation), France—alongside the Hispanic world—has become one of the pioneers in the development of academic writing curricula on the European continent (see Harnache in this book).

The methodology of the French writing teachers is derived from the practice of *écriture à contraintes* (constrained writing). This technique has, from the 1960s onward, been cultivated by experimental writers, most famously the literary collective OuLiPo (*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, or Workspace of Potential Writing), and is based on the premise that literary inventiveness is best stimulated by introducing constraints (Baetens and Poucel 2009). These creative constraints are typically formal (e.g., the prohibition of using the vowel “e,” a technique exploited by Georges Perec in *La Disparition* (1969, *The Disparition*)), but they can also be applied to matters of content (e.g., the imposition of a certain type of focalization). The techniques have been conveniently transformed into pedagogical tools in the framework of writing workshops, wherein participants are typically given a stimulus text and numerous constraints formulated by the instructor, in order to spark their creativity. It is however often overlooked that the OuLiPo, and especially the oeuvre of Perec, also contributed another element to the methodological toolbox of the French writing teacher, i.e., the urge to acquire knowledge about contemporary society through literary writing. Inspired by what can be termed Perec's sociological-anthropological writings, such as *Les Choses* (1965, *The Things*), *Espèces d'espaces* (1974, *Kinds of Spaces*) and *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* (1975, *Attempt to Exhaust a Parisian Place*), French workshops use literature as a method of gathering insight into the myriad dimensions of reality, from the tissue of urban spaces, to social habits of consumption.

Finally, French literary workshops, contrary to the Anglo-Saxon systems of academic writing, are situated in the margins of the official literary system. Most French writing teachers, François Bon being a well-known example, oppose the notion of creative writing as a trajectory which leads to finished literary products and careers in creative writing.

Their method primarily intends, by contrast, to increase self-confidence and creativity. Likewise, from an institutional perspective, there is a gap between the domain of creative writing workshops (and related literary advice instances, like short story writing competitions, writing magazines, and writing handbooks) and the literary field itself. According to sociologist Claude Poliak, these phenomena belong to a *simili-champ littéraire*, or a “field resembling the literary field”: only a very small number of amateur writers will eventually enter the literary system (Anna Gavalda is frequently cited as a counter-example), and only very few consecrated authors will be active in the world of writing workshops. Over the past decade, however, the divide between these seemingly opposed literary camps has gradually lessened, notably with the implementation of creative writing workshops at French universities. In the French field, no one has pre-figured the gradual disappearance of intra-disciplinary literary borders more than François Bon.

### FRANÇOIS BON’S *OUTILS DU ROMAN*

The most prominent representative of the *atelier d’écriture* movement, François Bon is a writer of experimental and engaged prose who started his career in the 1980s, and became involved with writing workshops from the 1990s onward. This resulted in the publication of *Tous les mots sont adultes* (2005, *All Words Are Mature*), an ambitious and systematic approach to creative writing that recalls the ideology of personal emancipation and the practice of “constrained writing” mentioned above. Since 1997, Bon also has a website, *tierslivre.net*, to promote his pedagogical views and writing exercises, and since 2013 he teaches writing at the arts school École nationale supérieure d’arts de Paris-Cergy.

Bon’s practice can be described, with another term borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari, as “rhizomatic.” It encompasses a multitude of thematic, generic, stylistic, and media-based threads, which are gradually fleshed out. In recent years, Bon has been branching out to the American literary canon, and to American creative writing methods. He made translations of classic works by Edgar Allan Poe, H. P. Lovecraft, and Ernest Hemingway, as well as of *Uncreative Writing* (2011) by controversial, Internet-inspired poet Kenneth Goldsmith (see Tsitsovits in this book). Moreover, in order to reflect more systematically on writing pedagogy in France, he started collecting and annotating an extensive corpus of American creative writing handbooks. In 2013, during the festival *Écrivains en*



*bord de mer*, Bon facilitated a panel on creative writing with the American writing instructors Cole Swensen, Thalia Field, and Laura Kasischke, and in 2016 he published, initially under the pseudonym Malt Olbren, the handbook *Outils du roman: Avec Malt Olbren sur les pistes et exercices du creative writing à l'américaine*.

This remarkable book first appeared as serial form in an online creative writing workshop offered on *tierslivre.net*. Bon introduced the text as a translation of a manuscript, entitled *Creative Writing No-Guide*, by a fictitious creative writing cult figure, Malt Olbren. This infamous and unorthodox teacher who passed away in 2004 was, according to Bon, a student of John Gardner and a fellow traveler of Raymond Carver. The manuscript, which Bon supposedly translated, was the basis of Olbren's workshops, but it unfortunately contained numerous imprecisions, contradictions, and gaps. The book, a slim volume of about 200 pages, comprises some twenty chapters and is divided into four parts: "Recommendations," "Narrations," "Constructions," and "Inventions."

The opening section "Recommendations" is both in form and content inspired by Comte de Lautréamont's *Poésies* (1870), whose anarchistic approach to writing is conveyed in author Harry Mathews's characterization: "Nothing is fixed or static. Stasis equals death" (Bon 2016, p. 19).<sup>8</sup> The section contains an extensive list of "anti-advice on writing" (*ibid.*, p. 13). These absurd, nonsensical maxims are mostly intended to ridicule the simplistic formulas propagated by American writing handbooks. For example, in a *détournement* of the advice "kill your darlings," Bon writes: "Cut away the useless elements, they say: remove the useful and maintain the rest, say to yourself that music is rarely found in potatoes" (*ibid.*, p. 13). Similarly, he ironically criticizes the emphasis on action found in most handbooks, stating that "(a)ction is a narrative's engine: well, let them run if they want, and find out what a novel becomes when it stays in bed" (*ibid.*, p. 15).

In the other sections of the book, Bon sets out to enrich the French ateliers d'écriture, and by extension French literature as a whole, with techniques and practices from American creative writing. As Bon indicates in the preface: "I wanted to orient my practice of writing workshops towards the American forms of narrative writing – a literature and an approach for which I have the utmost respect" (*ibid.*, p. 9). In practice, this means that the chapters in section two to four all contain writing exercises inspired by the techniques found in English-language handbooks, for instance, an assignment to re-write based on the notion

“kill your darlings,” or exercises in dialogue, character, or genre-writing. All these concepts are, according to Bon, currently neglected in French literary advice culture. Moreover, Bon constantly refers to poems, short stories, and novels by American and British authors like Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Malcolm Lowry, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, and William Carlos Williams. These references not only reinforce the translated manuscript’s air of authenticity, they also situate the proposed techniques within a specific literary-historical framework.

### MINOR LITERATURE IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

At this point, one may wonder how Bon positions himself vis-à-vis Anglo-American clichés like “show don’t tell,” “write what you know,” and “find your own voice,” as a model for the international development of literary advice and creative writing curricula. Indeed, at this point, my claim that François Bon instigates a minor literature by introducing this hegemonic poetics into the French field, might seem paradoxical. Is it rather not the case that *Outils du roman* yields to existing power dynamics in the transnational field of culture, by slavishly following a great, rather than a minor, literature? In order to capture the process of transference in *Outils du roman*, however, Bon’s strategies of irony, transformation and appropriation of the dominant poetics of creative writing must be taken into account.

Throughout the book, Bon does not leave the Anglo-American maxims intact, rather, he perversely reconstructs them into nonsensical aphorisms, that undermine the whole enterprise of a formula-driven creative writing. In the guise of Olbren, Bon presents a series of subtle transformations of established creative writing concepts, formulas, and techniques. An exercise in rewriting, for instance, is entitled “One fifth for William (Faulkner),” following the notion “kill your darlings” which is often accredited to Faulkner, and in a writing prompt for a minimalist style à la Raymond Carver, the rule is undermined in the emphatic urging to “(a)lways, always, always, always pare your story down. Only then does its character, its voice emerge” (ibid., p. 127). In the assignment “3, 2, 1, action,” Olbren/Bon adds that “(o)ur American particularity, and we are indeed proud of it, consists in the action. As we use it, the verb “doing” carries with it a historical density” (ibid., p. 78), drawing attention to the specificity of the supposedly universal rule of show don’t tell’.

One of the most telling instances of appropriation, however, can be found in the assignment “Author, cherish the crowd” from *Tools of the Novel’s* last section “Inventions,” which offers only two exercises that, in terms of aspiration, constitute the climax of the handbook. The first exercise is based on Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Oval Portrait” (1842) and provides a blueprint for a short story in the style of Gothic fiction. Here, contrary to most of Bon’s propositions, which typically result in brief and sketchy fragments of prose, one encounters a layout for the creation of a completed story. The second assignment, “Author, cherish the crowd,” by contrast approaches writing from a different angle, not with the aim of “inventing” a short story, but rather inventing ways to write about crowds.

The premise underlying this assignment is that literature, in contrast to recent media like cinema and television, has little expertise in depicting large gatherings. Olbren/Bon alludes to a number of classic texts that form an exception to this rule, mostly texts from the French tradition such as Stendhal’s *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1839), Gustave Flaubert’s *L’Éducation sentimentale* (1869), and Emile Zola’s *Germinal* (1885), and concludes that contemporary literature, in times of a growing world population, crowded urban environments, and popular mass-events such as manifestations and festivals, would benefit from engaging with the question of the crowd. Bon presents this exercise by narrating the scene as his American alter ego Malt Olbren. He evokes a visit to John Gardner, who has been hospitalized as the result of a motorcycle accident. Olbren/Bon recounts how his efforts to chat with Gardner fail, because the latter is too much distracted by the images on his hospital room’s television, in the following conversation:

Did you notice, my dear Malt, (he didn’t say “my dear”, but who cares) the ease with which film and television arrange scenes with groups or large crowds?

Yes, I responded, without a doubt passionately.

*Hey buddy*, he went on (this is really how he speaks), I’m telling you: do we novelists know how to use group scenes as effectively and naturally as cinema and television

Let’s see, I answered, probably even more passionately this time.

No, *motherfucker* (excuse me for repeating my friend Gardner’s exact words), let’s write! (ibid., pp. 173-174)

After this dialogue, which transforms the creation of a writing exercise into a narrative, Olbren/Bon unveils the different steps or constraints of the exercise. He proposes to write about a crowd familiar to the author (“One, choosing your crowd”), to contemplate the multiple perspectives from which gatherings can be described (“Two, choosing and isolating your parameters”), to focalize whilst in movement (“Three, I urge you to navigate the crowd”), and finally, to write as if creating the voice-over for a film (“The voice-over, Malt, let them write the voice over!”) (ibid., p. 178).

By presenting the assignment in this way, Olbren/Bon stages the process of transfer which eventually leads to a French minor literature. In this *mise-en-scène*, Gardner is no longer an icon, an idolized and abstract representative of the American tradition of creative writing. He is portrayed as a character with visible flaws and qualities, a fictional being whose acts and ideas allow varied responses. The reader can simultaneously accept Gardner’s suggestions and learn from them, while also rejecting or adapting them according to personal tastes and views. Or, to put it differently, in the exercise, a space emerges for maneuvering to transform not only Gardner’s insights, but also, by extension, the creative writing tradition which he represents. The way in which this transformation in *Outils du roman* takes place is equally telling. Drawing on the French *atelier d’écriture* tradition, Bon re-writes Gardner’s suggestion for a literature of the crowd as a genuine constrained-writing exercise. He formulates creative constraints on the levels of theme, focalization, and style. Moreover, the goal of the exercise, in contrast to the goal of the assignment inspired by “The Oval Portrait,” is in line with the *atelier d’écriture* movement: the objective is not to write a publishable short story, but rather to acquiring critical insight into the role and dynamics of contemporary crowds. When Olbren/Bon incites students to write about “the political version ([of crowds], these great gatherings on public squares which make walls crumble and dictators step down” (ibid., p. 180), he appeals to the *potential* of literature to represent such assemblies. Whether, in fact, François Bon based his idea for literary descriptions of the masses on one of Gardner’s literary advice texts is not important. The character of the American writing teacher functions as a mediator, representative of something bigger. Gardner not just embodies the tradition of the American creative writing workshop, but there is more to this assignment. The fact Gardner became inspired while watching television

suggests a new direction for literature, inspired by visual images and the media.

Thus, Bon appears not only to have drawn inspiration from American creative writing workshops, but also from the Hollywood films which have shaped contemporary imagery of the public more than any other medium. In other words, in his design for a French minor literature, Bon moves beyond appropriating and transforming American creative writing techniques and concepts, and in so doing, he positions himself vis-à-vis the most dominant narrative medium today: American cinema and television, and by extension the industry of production as well.

### MINOR LITERATURE IN THE FRENCH CONTEXT

This chapter employs the concept of minor literature on two levels: international and local. *Outils du roman* should not only be understood against the backdrop of Anglo-Saxon culture, but also against that of dominant, canonical, and commercially successful forms of writing in France. The selections from the book's preface, discussed above, illustrate how Bon seeks to enrich the French *atelier d'écriture* with approaches from American creative writing standards, in order to remedy a flaw that Bon registers in the *atelier d'écriture* itself, namely a lack of expertise when it comes to creating longer prose, but also with a more fundamental stake: the revival of French literature as such.

Undoubtedly, a primary motivation behind Bon's commitment as a writing teacher is his critical vision of the French established literature. This criticism comes in two shapes. Firstly, Bon's critique targets the French educational system and the literary texts being supported within and by this system (Bon 2005, p. 16). In his view, the classical literature that is taught in French high schools and universities suffers from a lack of expressive force, an inadequacy which is not necessarily situated in the texts, but rather in the temporal distance between the themes and forms found in students' daily lives and the works of authors like Jean Racine, Denis Diderot, Victor Hugo, and François-René de Chateaubriand. Bon argues that the more sensible approach would be to initiate young people into the world of letters with texts relevant to their own thematic sensibilities. The minor literature which Bon defends, and for which he seeks to shape the conditions through a handbook like *Outils du roman*, could bring solace on this level, not so much because Bon makes a plea for a youth-centered literature, but because he argues that meaningful forms

of writing can only come about in dialogue with the present: “To evolve, to submit to its jumps and its leaps, literature should constantly listen to the world” (Bon 2012, p. 20).

Furthermore, Bon is extremely skeptical of established literature with commercial success. The contemporary French literature market, he believes, runs on the constant repetition of standardized recipes and calculated diversification: “This era prefers what’s pale” (Bon 2005, p. 141), with the media promoting mediocre literary works which generate revenues and entertain the audience. By contrast, literature of real value, innovative forms of writing which shed light on the present world, have no place in this system regulated by star-authors and sales numbers. Bon’s position is very clear in his continuous critique on the *rentrée littéraire*, the highly mediatized opening of the French book year which takes place annually from the end of August until the beginning of November. He describes this event as a “normalizing and ever-growing cacophony on its way to fast suicide” comparing it to a “tap with lukewarm water.” In the autumn of 2017, he published a video series with reading advice under the title of “Anti-rentrée littéraire,” which can equally be understood as an attempt to construct a minor literature. Bon does not stand alone in this analysis of the French world of letters, it is part of the wider debate about the perceived crisis of the death of French literature, which in turn speaks to a larger ongoing discourse on the demise of French culture as such, found in popular media, in contributions of conservative authors such as Richard Millet and Éric Zemmour, and in specialized academic circuits. (Todorov 2007; Compagnon 2007).

While the accounts diverge depending on the commentators’ political preferences, and while some voices attempt to create some perspective (Viart and Demanze 2011; Gervais, 2016), the sense of crisis is very much alive in the French field of literature, and somewhat paradoxically, it has resulted in a heightened productivity. Different interventions (debates, pamphlets, essays, books) have generated an ongoing discussion about the past, present, and future of French literature. A more pragmatic, though less visible, line in this debate is precisely represented by the literary advice tendency represented by *Outils*. François Bon is not the sole author who, instead of presenting us with a method for writing publishable books, turns to the writing manual as a tool to overcome the cultural crisis. Advice texts by Olivier Cadiot, Martin Page, and Chloé Delaume, all attempt to establish “lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) leading to different views. Like Bon, these authors

oppose what they consider the excessive commercialization and media-tization of French literature, by drawing upon techniques and concepts from American creative writing texts. In *Manuel d'écriture et de survie* (2014, Manual of writing and survival), Martin Page turns to Ray Bradbury's *Zen in the Art of Writing* (1990) as a source of inspiration for a reflection on new forms of authorship. In *S'écrire. Mode d'emploi* (2008, Writing oneself. A User's Manual), Chloé Delaume approaches the French genre of autofiction from a how-to-write perspective, albeit in an idiosyncratic manner. In his experimental book *Histoire de la littérature récente* (2016, History of Recent Literature), finally, Olivier Cadiot parodies and transforms the typical commercial discourse of many literary advice texts.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has analyzed contemporary French literary advice culture from a comparative, transnational perspective, focusing on the ways in which French writing handbooks integrate elements from the American tradition of creative writing in an attempt at creating a so-called minor French literature. In particular, I demonstrated how François Bon's pseudonymously authored handbook *Outils du roman* submits American creative writing techniques to processes of *détournement*, appropriation, and transformation. The notion of minor literature applies to this strategy on two levels. On the one hand, it renews the well-worn clichés of an internationally dominant creative writing poetics by showing how the even more dominant cultural forms of American cinema and television, applied to creative writing, can offer new prompts to stimulate a genuinely innovative literature that is able to adequately represent the contemporary. On the other hand, minor literature refers to forms of writing which Bon attempts to develop, using American creative writing standards, in order to take his distance from the commercial and canonical works that dominate the French literary field.

More broadly, this chapter argues for the importance of examining works on literary advice when studying processes of literary transfer and change, which occurs via many pathways. Here too, translations play a role, as does the emergence of new media (as illustrated through the Gardner example from *Outils du roman*). Considering the growing global influence of creative writing, it is important to analyze the specificity of the transfers in the domain of literary advice, in order to account for

changes in local literary production. In the case of the French field, it remains to be seen whether the creative writing-inspired efforts of François Bon and his fellow advice authors will eventually materialize into a genuine minor literature. “Let’s see,” Malt Obren says in *Outils du roman*. “No, *motherfucker*,” John Gardner answers with less hesitation, “let’s write!” (Bon 2016, p. 174).

## NOTES

1. In the present text, the terms “Anglo-Saxon” and “American” are used in a generalizing way. Rather than oversight of the author, this usage reflects the way in which French literary advice authors refer to American creative writing as a monolith.
2. All translations from the work of François Bon will be by the author.
3. Previous research has connected François Bon’s oeuvre to the concept of “minor literature” (Chadderot 2017). The link between Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and François Bon is a logical one: There are numerous theoretical and poetic similarities, and Bon regularly refers to Deleuze, especially the latter’s *Cinéma 1* (1983) and *Cinéma 2* (1985).
4. The issue of American cultural dominance is a standard trope in both popular and critical discourse in France (Guerlain 1997; Kuisel 2012).
5. As I use it, the concept of *détournement* recalls the situationist definition of deceptive *détournement* as the reappropriation “of an intrinsically significant element, which derives a different scope from the new context” (Debord and Wolman 2006 p. 16). It signals a text’s relocation from one context to another in a strategic attempt to subvert its meaning. It especially signifies a strategic attempt to appropriate the images and language of commerce and industry, and use it against the capitalist system itself.
6. In terms of poetics and popular impact, Antoine Albalat’s *L’Art d’écrire enseigné en vingt leçons* (1899, *The Art of Writing in Twenty Lessons*), *La Formation du style par l’assimilation des Auteurs* (1902, *Developing One’s Style by Assimilating Other Writers’ Style*), and *Comment on devient écrivain* (1925, *How One Becomes a Writer*) could convincingly be likened to William Strunk and E. B. White’s *The Elements of Style* (1918). Like this American classic, Albalat’s books have contributed to the popular notion that everyone can learn how to write, mostly by focusing on issues of style such as clarity, coherence, and variation. His work is still widely available today.
7. Célestin Freinet is a noted French educational reformer and founder of the Freinet Modern School Movement. He developed his ideas and teaching methods during the interbellum, parallel with thinkers like John



Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Maria Montessori who were involved in the *Ligue internationale pour l'éducation nouvelle* (Rossignol 1996).

8. Harry Mathews was an author and translator, a close friend to Georges Perec, and the first American member of the OuLiPo.

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# “Mostrar, no decir”: The Influence of and Resistance Against Workshop Poetics on the Hispanic Literary Field

*Andrés Franco Harnache*

## INTRODUCTION

By the end of 1607, Félix Lope de Vega, went to the Academy of Madrid, then an association of noblemen, to read a small *ars poetica* with the intention of defending his *comedias*. Just after the release of *El verdadero amante* and *Los hechos de Garcilaso de la Vega* (1585, *The Real Lover* and *The Facts of Garcilaso de la Vega*), the Sevillian had become the best-known playwright in Madrid to the extent that, by the turn of the century, he had obtained the monopoly of the theatrical milieu, forcing other writers, like Cervantes, to print their plays instead of producing them on stage. The critiques did not take long to appear. His peers accused him, sometimes rather violently, of letting down the unquestionable theatrical laws set forth by Aristotle and Horace. Lope, “a brave horse without bridle,” as Góngora, one of his contenders, called him (2006, n.p., my trans.), was tired of the rigidity of the classical norms and created a new

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type of theater based on the tastes of the Spanish public, a mixture of comedy and tragedy without respect for the unities of space and time. Aware of his own value, El Fénix, as people knew him, claimed in front of the noblemen of the academy that although he knew the Greek and Latin precepts by heart, he deliberately decided to keep them in his drawer, choosing instead to please the tastes of the people, who actually were paying him. Early on in his manifesto, he summarizes his *ars poetica*:

True it is that I have sometimes written in accordance with the art which few know; but, no sooner do I see coming from some other source the monstrosities full of painted scenes where the crowd congregates and the women who canonize this sad business, than I return to that same barbarous habit and when I have to write a comedy I lock in the precepts with six keys, I banish Terence and Plautus from my study that they may not cry out at me; for truth, even in dumb books, is wont to call aloud; I and I write in accordance with that art which they devised who aspired to the applause of the crowd; for, since the crowd pays for the comedies, it is fitting to talk foolishly to it to satisfy its taste. (Lope de Vega 1914, p. 24)

The reception of Lope's *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias* (The New Art of Writing Plays), read in front of the members of the Academia and published afterward in the poetic anthology *Rimas* (1609, Verses), was mixed. Francisco Cascales called Lope's plays "hermaphrodite monsters" and "frights" (1617, n.p.), and Cervantes, through the voice of the priest in *Don Quijote*, questioned Lope's inclination to favor the taste of the public without considering its literary value (2003, pp. 556–557). Moreover, disciples of Lope, like Calderón de la Barca, took Lope's precepts and mocked them in plays like *La dama duende* (1629, The Phantom Lady). By the eighteenth century, Lope's *comedias* would go out of style, while the Hispanic literary field began to favor classicist French literature, and to establish a neo-classical literature guided by Ignacio de Luzán's *La Poética* (1737, The Poetic) and the moral plays of Tomás de Iriarte (1750–1791).

Taking this example from the theatrical milieu, I propose that Lope's defiance of classical prescriptions is characteristic not only of his own persona, writing and time, but of a more general tendency in the Hispanic literary field.<sup>1</sup> Since the sixteenth century, known as the Spanish Golden Age (*Siglo de oro*), Hispanic literature has been caught between the influences of outside literary traditions (including the Greek and Latin

classics, the Italian *dolce stil novo* and since the eighteenth and nineteenth-century French and Anglo-American realism), and its own literary norms. Hispanic literature, due to a combination of pride, geographic isolation, and cultural hybridity, has constructed a rich canon of its own, which, as Borges advocates in *El escritor argentino y la tradición* (1932, *The Argentine Writer and Tradition*), speaks with the other major European traditions, but also to a greater or lesser extent functions largely outside of those norms. Such was the case, for instance, of the so-called Boom generation in the second half of the twentieth century, where writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Elena Garro, Marvel Moreno, Juan Goytisolo, and Julio Cortázar<sup>2</sup> appropriated the modernist poetics of other US/European literatures (James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Samuel Beckett, etc.), in order to create something new. According to Randolph Pope, Boom literature:

relied on a Cubist superposition of different points of view, it made time and lineal progress questionable, and it was technically complex. Linguistically self-assured, it used the vernacular without apologies [and] used innovative techniques that were tingly bound to a political message: anti-elitist, progressive, anarchic. (Pope 1996, pp. 231–232)

Today, the emergence of academic programs for Creative Writing in Spanish, first in the United States and subsequently in Latin America and Spain, and the ensuing proliferation of literary advice handbooks, has led to the imposition of new rules, the poetics of the North-American workshop: “read like a writer,” “find your own voice,” and “show don’t tell” (Dawson 2005, pp. 87–112).

In what follows, I outline the existing Hispanic writing advice tradition, which until recently stuck to the Romantic view of the writer-as-genius. This tradition began to change by the end of the twentieth century, due to both US literary and MFA influence. However, even if the “program,” as Mark McGurl calls it (2009), became increasingly influential in the Hispanic field, some contemporary authors now resist, in the spirit of Lope, the pressures of normative creative writing poetics.

## A SHORT HISTORY OF CREATIVE WRITING ADVICE IN THE HISPANIC WORLD

According to Fraile Amador in *Textos sobre escritura creativa: el origen de una disciplina* (2018, *Texts About Creative Writing, The Origins of a Discipline*), there has been for a long time a lack of literary advice texts on the Hispanic literary world. This can be explained by the tendency to see writers as Romantic geniuses and their work as a product of inspiration. Although, as in other countries, the serial novel and the short story industry developed in the nineteenth century, and despite the appearance of some masters of the genre, like Benito Pérez Galdós, Horacio Quiroga, and Rubén Darío, there was no concomitant advice tradition, as Andrew Levy describes for the United States (Levy 1993, pp. 77–107). As Leopoldo Alas, also known as Clarín, explains when talking about Spain’s nineteenth-century short story industry in *La prensa y los cuentos* (1896, *Press and Short Stories*): the field was full of dilettantes without technical knowledge of what they were doing.

Even authors with more expertise, such as Ruben Darío, the Nicaraguan writer who spearheaded the modernist revolution in both Latin America and Spain by the end of the nineteenth century, and who was a ferocious critic of the Iberic literary establishment,<sup>3</sup> remained attached to the Romantic conception of the writer and rejected the idea of transmission of the literary craft. In the manifesto that serves as the introduction of *Prosas profanas y otros poemas* (1896, *Profane Prose and Other Poems*), he proclaims that “my literature is not to set others on their course” (Darío 1915b, pp. 47–48, my trans.). In *Historia de mis libros* (*History of my Books*), he explains, in what resembles the endeavors of Poe in “The Philosophy of Composition,” his approach to composing poetry but ends with a simple summary of influences, rather than proposing a treaty on the technical aspects of his writing. The *savoir faire* of literature remains a mystery to most, save for the privileged few, as one might conclude from his autobiography *La vida de Rubén Darío escrita por él mismo* (1915a, *The Life of Rubén Darío Written by Himself*), where he describes himself as a gifted poet at the age of eight. Some years later, Juan Valera’s *Apuntes sobre el nuevo arte de hacer novelas* (1934, *Outlines for a New Art of Writing Novels*), borrowing Lope’s defense in his *Arte nuevo*, is written from the perspective of a critic, rather than that of a professional offering advice on how to plan,

write, and publish a novel, as in the handbooks popular in the United States by 1930.

With the Boom generation, a generation more in contact, as Darío desired, with other European literary traditions, the Romantic idea of a writer started to fade. Raised in newsrooms, like García Márquez, or in academia, like Mario Vargas Llosa and Octavio Paz, this generation is less romantic and more practical in their conception of the literary career. Still, the idea of writing as a teachable skill, and therefore as a subject of academic instruction, had yet to emerge. The figure of the writer as a lonely creator was confirmed and mystified by the paratexts surrounding the literary success of novels like *Cien años de soledad* (1967, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*). In a 1976 interview with the reporter German Castro Caycedo, for instance, the future Colombian Nobel-Prize winner García Márquez describes the genesis of his better-known work as a lonely process without workshops, in times of desperation and poverty (first in Paris and then in Mexico City), thus reinforcing the Romantic myth of the starving and solitary artist.

By the time of this interview, however, writing workshops had become popular in some southern South American countries (Fraile Amador 2018, p. 388). Nevertheless, the format was not identical to their US counterparts: they were mostly outside of academia and did not have any theoretical basis. For instance, *A la hora de escribir* (1988, *When writing*), a transcript of the workshops led by Bioy Casares in the 1980s, shows the workshop as a closed-door interview where assistants or disciples ask for the master's advice, without any commentary on their own texts. One of the concerns raised here is the possibility of teaching literary writing. The Argentinean author confesses that he does not believe that the creation of literature can be taught, yet he still asserts that workshops are ideal places to establish a network, or as he puts it, places where “one can find people to whom literature is something real, something important” (Bioy Casares 1988, pp. 106–107, my trans.). Likewise, in a 1999 lecture to aspiring writers, Carlos Fuentes warns that “books are not written themselves, neither are they (written) in a committee” (Fuentes 1999, n.p., my trans.). Not “in a committee” means not in group, and therefore by extension, not in workshops. Mario Vargas Llosa, by contrast, is the Boom writer more in agreement with a creative writing approach. While not involved in workshops himself, he wrote two advice books, *Historia secreta de una novela* (1971, *The Secret Story of a Novel*) and *Cartas a un joven novelista* (1997, *Letters to a Young Novelist*). In the latter,



which recalls E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), he discusses subjects such as point of view, construction of characters, use of time, etc., while repeating the well-known adage that talent is innate, but must be cultivated.

However, by the time Fuentes gave his conference at the Monterrey Institute of Technology and Higher Education, and Vargas Llosa published his advice books, a new generation of Hispanic writers, more connected with the North American literature and the workshop poetics, had spread across the continent. A post-Boom generation of writers born after the Cuban Revolution (1959) were distancing themselves from their predecessors, in order to forge their own positions in the literary field. Leaning toward the American standards of the workshop, they broke with the predominance of politics in literature, the prevalence of indigenous and naive subjects, and most importantly, with the dominant current of magical realism. This generation was marked by two manifestos: *McOndo* (Chile) and *Crack* (Mexico), both of 1996.

The 'McOndo' group was the more radical of the two in its opposition to their literary predecessors.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, this group adopted a paradoxical relationship to the American creative writing workshop. In the introduction to the short stories collection *McOndo* (1996), which would thereafter serve as a manifesto, Alberto Fuguet explains that he was invited to "the most important factory/workshop of new North American writers," University of Iowa International Writing Program (Fuguet and Gómez 1996, p. 9. my trans.). His initial surprise at seeing the popularity of Hispanic literature in this context, soon turned into disappointment. After being first contacted and then rejected by an American editor, he became aware that the interest of the US market for Hispanic literature was limited to the stereotypes of magical realism. By then, he and other young Latin-American writers in the program had already been creating a more urban literature which, as Fuguet suggested, could be written in any country of the first world. Their short stories, for instance, not only treated more urban subjects, but also complied with standard workshop poetics which had already begun to make their influence.

Thus, Fuguet and his Chilean colleagues developed a new literature in the workshop of the magazine *Zona Contacto*, with settings in big cities with metros and shopping malls, populated with characters who neither fly nor are immortal, but instead listen to punk music and take drugs. The Mexican authors of the 'Crack' group, although more respectful of the Boom legacy, also wanted to keep their work clear of folklore and magical

realism. Wanting to live more in McOndo than in Macondo, the Hispanic writers born after the Cuban revolution (1959) entered the twenty-first century with one foot in the US tradition, and in this way, with an eye on ‘the program’ and workshop poetics.

### FROM BOOM TO MFA: THE RISING INFLUENCE OF CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAMS IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY HISPANIC LITERATURE

The path from Boom to MFA can be traced via three lists: ‘Bogotá 39,’ in its 2007 and 2017 versions, and the selection made by *Granta Magazine* in 2010. Taken together, they more or less offer a complete overview of contemporary Hispanic production.<sup>5</sup> The first was proposed by members of the Hay Festival Cartagena and the coordinators of Bogotá UNESCO ‘World Book Capital’ in 2007. The jury, formed by three Colombian writers, selected thirty-nine Latin-American authors, all younger than thirty-nine, with the intention of promoting a new post-Boom generation forty years after the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The selection known as ‘Bogotá 39’ consisted both of well-known writers, such as Crack’s founder Jorge Volpi (Planeta Prize 2012 and Alfaguara Prize 2018) and writers who would later be consecrated, like Juan Gabriel Vásquez (Alfaguara Award 2011, Le Prix Cabaret des Lycéens 2016, shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize 2019), Junot Díaz (Pulitzer 2008), and Antonio Ungar (Anagrama Prize 2010), among others.

Three years later, *Granta Magazine* (the magazine which became famous for its lists of ‘Britain’s best young novelists’ (1983, 1993, 2003, and 2013) and ‘America’s best young novelists’ (1996, 2007, 2017) made, under the leadership of Valerie Miles, a special issue on Hispanic literature taking advantage of the posthumous success of Roberto Bolaño in the US market.<sup>6</sup> The *Granta* list not only aimed at fueling the Hispanic market, but also sought to promote the promise of the new Hispanic generation for the dominant Anglophone audience. With only four overlaps with the ‘Bogotá 39’ list, the *Granta* list filled the gap of Spanish writers in the first ‘Bogotá 39’ and added names that would garner critical recognition, like Samanta Schweblin, whose *Distancia de rescante* (2014, Fever Dream) was an International Booker Prize finalist in 2017, Andrés Barba (Anagrama Prize 2017), and Patricio Prom (Alfaguara Prize 2019).

Finally, ten years after the first ‘Bogotá 39,’ the Hay Festival decided to create a new list, this time with a more mixed jury of already-established authors including Leila Guerriero (Argentina), Carmen Bullosa (Mexico), and Darío Jaramillo Agudelo (Colombia). The list still favored the under-represented Latin-American market, but also included small and regional publishing houses, besides the most known and transnational ones like Alfaguara and Planeta.

If we take a closer look at the education level of the authors, a sociological change in the Hispanic field becomes clear. In both lists, we see a predominance of writers with a BA or MA in literature, and a significant number of PhDs (see Table 14.1), particularly in regions where this title is an actual privilege. Moreover, most of those listed have traveled to Europe or to the United States to complete their studies, or, when they followed educational paths in their own countries, they eventually went abroad to increase their chances of notoriety, especially to Spain, which became the center of the Hispanic publishing world after the 1960s (Ayén 2014, pp. 75–115).

Unlike the Anglophone authors, who since the early selections in *Granta*’s lists came from the workshop milieu, confirming McGurl’s thesis that postwar American fiction is dominated by the ‘Program,’ the Hispanic writers of the 2007 ‘Bogotá 39’ and the *Granta* list rarely followed MFAs in creative writing. Those connected to academia, teach mostly literary criticism, rather than literature as a generative art form. In the 2007 ‘Bogotá 39,’ there is only one author with an MFA, Junot Díaz.<sup>7</sup> His inclusion as a Hispanic author, however, is somewhat controversial, since he moved from the Dominican Republic to the States in his childhood, completed his education there, writes solely in English and is widely considered as an American writer.

In the *Granta* 2010 list, we begin to see a shift. On this list, only one author earned an MFA, Federico Flaco, but in contrast to Junot Díaz, he is an Argentinian who grew up in his country and who traveled especially

**Table 14.1** New Hispanic generation by educational level

| New Hispanic Generation by Educational Level |    |                    |              |                 |       |                    |   |                 |              |                    |       |               |    |       |              |    |       |
|--|----|--------------------|--------------|-----------------|-------|--------------------|---|-----------------|--------------|--------------------|-------|---------------|----|-------|--------------|----|-------|
| Bogotá 39 2007                               |    |                    |              | Granta 2010     |       |                    |   | Bogotá 39 2017  |              |                    |       |               |    |       |              |    |       |
| Education Level                              | %  | Place of Education | %            | Education Level | %     | Place of Education | % | Education Level | %            | Place of Education | %     |               |    |       |              |    |       |
| Bachelor                                     | 16 | 41.03              | Home Country | 17              | 43.59 | Bachelor           | 7 | 31.82           | Home country | 12                 | 54.55 | Bachelor      | 17 | 43.59 | Home Country | 21 | 53.85 |
| PhD  | 12 | 30.77              | Europe       | 11              | 28.21 | No edu.            | 6 | 27.27           | N/A          | 5                  | 22.73 | No edu.       | 4  | 10.26 | N/A          | 4  | 10.26 |
| No edu.                                      | 4  | 10.26              | USA          | 8               | 20.51 | PhD                | 5 | 22.73           | USA          | 3                  | 13.64 | PhD           | 6  | 15.38 | USA          | 8  | 20.51 |
| Master                                       | 4  | 10.26              | N/A          | 3               | 7.69  | Master             | 2 | 9.09            | Europe       | 2                  | 9.09  | Master        | 6  | 15.38 | Europe       | 6  | 15.38 |
| MFA Cine                                     | 2  | 5.13               |              |                 |       | MFA CINE           | 1 | 4.55            |              |                    |       | MFA Cine &Art | 2  | 5.13  |              |    |       |
| MFA CW                                       | 1  | 2.56               |              |                 |       | MFA CW             | 1 | 4.55            |              |                    |       | MFA CW        | 4  | 10.26 |              |    |       |

to the United States to do his MFA in Spanish. Here we see neither an enduring (or permanent) absence from Latin America, nor a change of language or of literary tradition. In the 2017 ‘Bogotá 39’ list, the number of writers holding MFAs increases to four. The reason for this sudden change stems from the recent but rapid proliferation of MFAs in creative writing since 2006, which, to some extent, alter the future trajectory of the Hispanic literary field.

At the arrival of the twentieth century, Hispanic authors had two primary means of subsistence: academic career or journalism.<sup>8</sup> Those options permitted authors to hold second professions besides writing, which, as Pierre-Michel Menger points out, continued to produce low profits, even in highly developed markets.<sup>9</sup> Although the idea of going to school to learn how to write was still uncommon, it became more visible through the increased cultural influence of the United States. From the 1970s, the United States has received an increasing number of immigrants from Latin American countries due to their proximity and the high political and economic instability of the region.<sup>10</sup> The population of Hispanic people in the United States rose from nearly 15 million in 1979 to 56 million in 2017, bringing it to 17.6% of the total population and five points above that of African Americans, who, for a long time, comprised the largest ethnic group in the United States.<sup>11</sup> This sudden change in demographics coincided with a cultural shift and a slow but unstoppable integration of Latin-American and US culture. The children of the newcomers, 20% of whom were illegal and living below the poverty line, entered the educational system, eventually achieving the roles of politicians, scientists, lawyers, and of course, writers.

*The House on Mango Street* (1984) by Sandra Cisneros was one of the first US novels written by a second-generation Latin-American emigrant. The novel, written in English, tells the story of a young girl of Mexican origin struggling to adapt in the suburbs of Chicago. In a recent interview for the *New York Times*, Cisneros relates some of the problems she experienced while writing the novel as her MFA thesis at the University of Iowa. She was criticized by her advisor for the excessive use of the word ‘little,’ an English alternative to the diminutive *-ito* in her Spanish-speaking Mexican household. She did not realize until she left Iowa: “I was writing a letter in Spanish and I thought, this is the voice of *The House on Mango Street*” (Gleibermann 2017). The linguistic conflict between Spanish and English, theorized by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands* (1987) as a relationship of dominance and resistance, also appeared in Junot

Díaz' fiction. During his workshops at Cornell University, Díaz, a 2008 Pulitzer Prize winner, was reprimanded for the occasional use of Spanish slang in his (English-language) work. Both Cisneros and Díaz eventually found their place in the US literary field.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, their anecdotes are exemplary of the clash between the Hispanic and the English literary tradition in the workshop milieu, that would eventually lead to the first bilingual MFA in Creative Writing in 2006 in El Paso, Texas, a city just on the border of Mexico and with a long history of bilingualism and multiculturalism. By the end of the decade, New York University opened its MFA with the support of the Spanish bank Santander, which sponsored the fellowship of Federico Flaco, the first writer with an MFA in the *Granta* list. In 2012, the University of Iowa opened its own Spanish MFA, and, in 2016, the University of Houston offered a PhD in Spanish Creative writing, headed by the Mexican writer Cristina Rivera Garza.

These programs not only filled in a gap in the US field for young Hispanic immigrants, they also attracted young writers from Latin America and Spain, who were drawn by the prestige and scholarships offered by these schools. Situated between the Spanish department of these universities and Creative Writing programs, presented as multi-ethnic, these new MFAs, despite their intended plurality, perpetuated the tradition of creative writing scholarship built up in the United States for over a century. The first program, in El Paso, is perhaps the most explicit in this appropriation and integration. According to the program's website and its course descriptions for the fall 2019 semester, classes of Spanish and Latin-American literature are complemented with technical courses of creating writing, using handbooks like Hamilton Sharon's *Essential Literary Terms* and Chris Albani's *The Face: Cartography of the Void*. El Paso's MFA also offers a class about creative writing pedagogy, since according to their website "(a)t some point all writers get to teach, either in high schools, community colleges, or independent literary workshops." In the NYU and Iowa MFAs, even if their approach is less theoretical and more practical, Spanish workshops are complemented with the more classic courses in English where the workshop poetics are already in place.

In 2008, similar programs began to appear in the Latin America and Spain as well, when, for example, the MFA of Creative Writing at the National University of Colombia opened, more closely aligned with the university's cinema and art departments, than with that of literature. At the same time, the University Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona launched what has become the most prestigious MFA outside of the

United States, with a program constructed between master classes given by Hispanic writers, and more technical courses, for instance the one taught by Jorge Carrion, based on James Wood’s *How Fiction Works*.<sup>13</sup> After the success of these initial programs, the MFAs spread throughout the Hispanic world: University of Sevilla (2009), National University Tres de Febrero, Argentina (2013), University Diego Portales, Chile (2015), among others. While a complete list of MFA creative writing programs in Spanish does not yet exist, according to the RED Programa de escritura de las Américas (Writing Program of the Americas), led by the University of Texas in El Paso, and the European Association of Creative Writing Programs, at least 13 programs are active today, spread between the USA, Latin America, and Spain, a number which is likely a significant underestimation.

All of these programs have writers from the post-Boom generation as instructors, mostly coming from the McOndo generation and the authors included on the first ‘Bogotá 39’ list. While these writers became professionals without having MFAs themselves, they were nonetheless close to the workshop environment popularized by such programs, later finding teaching positions in them. In that regard, MFAs fulfill the function of institutional support, as outlined by McGurl, allowing writers earn a living which would have been difficult to obtain through literary work alone (2008). More recently, younger writers who were educated in international programs also found positions in their programs as teachers (i.e., Mónica Ojeda in Pompeu Fabra’s MFA), or have even returned to their own countries to create new programs. The MFA of the Instituto Caro y Cuervo (2017) in Bogotá, for instance, was founded by young writers Juan Álvarez, Gloria Susana Esquivel, Giuseppe Caputo (who all three received their degrees from El Paso and NYU), and Juan Cárdenas (who, with Caputo appeared on the 2017 ‘Bogotá 39’ list).

### THE IMPACT OF WORKSHOP POETICS ON HISPANIC LITERATURE

In spite of the resulting institutionalization of creative writing in the Hispanic field, a concomitant rise of Hispanic writing manuals was not established to support its own pedagogy. A search through the most prominent bookshops of Spain, México, and Argentina<sup>14</sup> shows a lack of a Hispanic technical corpus beyond the poetics and essays of the Boom authors, or the more popular-orientated literary advice handbooks

which merely translate or adapt the English formulas (e.g., Nerio Tello's *Escritura creativa: Guía de indagación y práctica literaria* [Creative Writing: Guide of Literary Inquiry and Praxis]). As a result, and in spite of their inherent cultural resistance, Hispanic MFAs remain, so to speak, at the mercy of Anglophone literary advice handbooks. This inevitably impacts the manner in which the new Hispanic literature is being and will be written, as well as how this literature will be read.<sup>15</sup> In what follows, we will focus on one of the most famous and worn-out workshop adages: 'show don't tell.' Whereas the other two commandments singled out by Dawson 'read like a writer' and 'find your own voice' (Dawson 2005, pp. 87–120) can easily be adapted to different literary traditions, 'show don't tell' is strongly tied to a specific poetics, i.e., the English and French realist traditions of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, particularly that of Flaubert.

Analyzing the literary advice from the 1930s, Dawson points out that the 'show don't tell' rule is intended to avoid lazy or long-winded writing (ibid., pp. 98–106). Taking the advice to extremes, however, entails the suppression of adjectives and leads to the predominance of verbs, that is to say, of actions. By the 1980s, the 'show don't tell' rule was associated with the predominance of literary genres such as dirty realism (led by authors like Raymond Carver or Dennis Johnson) in North-American MFAs, which was eventually canonized in Tobias Wolff's compilation *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Short Stories* (1994) (Hardbach 2014, p. 20). Although a more Flaubertian and extensive examples, less in the vein of minimalism or dirty realism (for instance Jonathan Franzen, Lorrie Moore or Alice Munro) also exists, the popularity of 'show don't tell' still tends to privilege 'mimesis' (images) above 'diegesis' (an eloquent narrator) and results in a more distanced, observer point of view, as a primary feature of high-valued literature. As James Wood, critic of *The New Yorker* and author of *How Fiction Works* (so a prescriber of the US literary establishment), reminds us:

We hardly remark of good prose that it favors the telling and brilliant detail; that it privileges a high degree of visual noticing; that it maintains an unsentimental composure and knows how to withdraw, like a good valet, from superfluous commentary; that it judges good and bad neutrally; that it seeks out the truth, even at the cost of repelling us; and that the author's fingerprints on all this are, paradoxically, traceable but not visible. (Wood 2008, p. 39)

Offering a sequence of images, the realistic style entails that commentaries between descriptions as well as the meddling of the Balzacian voice elaborating his opinions from one character to the next are eliminated, and instead favors the mute eye which is the narrator of Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale*. It relies on the capacity of images to enunciate, on the ellipsis as a primary technique, and on the supremacy of Hemingway's iceberg theory: “The dignity of the movement of iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water” (Hemingway 1999, p. 260). The result is what Jacques Rancière calls in *Le Destin des images* (2003, *The Future of the Image*) ‘phrase-images,’ a set of images which, paired together, transmit an idea (the French philosopher gives the example of Zola's description of the preparation of the *boudin noir* (blood sausage) in *Le Ventre de Paris* as a counterpoint to the misery of the Second French Empire). This technique would later be borrowed and adopted for the cinema and is now commonly applied in film editing (Rancière 2003, pp. 58–60).

Even if this type of literature believes in an intelligent reader who is supposed to be an active agent in the construction of meaning, it has a propensity to become flat and repetitive. It denies the modernist efforts of writers from the beginning of the twentieth century who, focusing on the limits of language and structure, were actually fighting against the conventions of nineteenth-century realism. Furthermore, this image-laden realism goes against the traditions of the Hispanic field and the more experimental styles of the Boom literature which, as Cortázar famously desired, look for a more active role of the audience in the construction of meaning. As a result, the literature born from the influence of the dirty realism seems like a factory of images, or a contest of who can communicate, through mere descriptions, the largest amount of ideas in the cleverest way.

In addition, as has been noted by McGurl, the similar background of literary MFA holders, due to an expansion of the middle-class and increased access to higher education in the post-war era (even in underdeveloped Latin-America), has produced a generation of lower-middle-class writers, obsessed with telling their own stories or, as McGurl puts it, with a self-reflexive fiction (McGurl 2009, p. 268). As a result, the literature became repetitive both in form (workshop poetics) and in content (self-reflexive). This also applies to many of the Hispanic writers who emigrated to the US, obtained MFA degrees, and appropriated the workshop poetics. In these cases, Carver's lower-middle-class hero is replaced



by a working-class or lower-middle-class immigrant who has integrated into US society through (in the most self-reflexive/auto-fictional examples) access to higher education, such as the MFA, as in the works of Junot Díaz and Sandra Cisneros, as well as those of Daniel Alarcón *Lost City Radio* (2007) and Julianne Pachico *The Lucky Ones* (2018).

## CONCLUSION

What, then, is the state of the contemporary fiction in the Hispanic world? Have the MFAs actually changed the way Hispanic writers approach literature? As mentioned above, the distancing from the Boom's avant-garde initiatives started well before the introduction of MFAs in the Hispanic literary landscape. In the 1990s, the McOndo and Crack generations looked to the US canon, for inspiration and in the hope of international recognition. This resulted in a workshop style of literature, even before the emergence and institutionalization of MFAs in the Hispanic field. The Alfaguara prizes, which can be considered a barometer of the mainstream literary tendencies in the Hispanic world, went to novels with these characteristics between 1998 and 2011, for instance, Xavier Velasco's *Diablo guardián* (2003, *Guardian Devil*), which follows the precepts of the McOndo manifesto, Santiago Roncagliolo's *Rojo abril* (2006, *Red April*), which pays homage to the simplicity of pulp fiction, and Juan Gabriel Vázquez *El ruido de las cosas al caer* (2011, *The Sound of Things Falling*), a relatively complex novel, while still applying realistic and traditional styles.

The workshop poetics appears even more clearly in the first novels of young Hispanic writers after 2010, most of which are the results of MFA theses, such as Susana Esquivel's *Animales del fin mundo* (2017, *Animals at the End of the World*). This novel, in an accomplished 'show don't tell' style, tangentially discusses Colombian violence in the 1980s from the point of view of a young girl who witnesses the divorce of her parents. A product of workshop poetics, the novel only differs in style from other competing US MFA works as Emma Cline's *The Girls* (2016) or Kristen Roupenian's *Cat Person* (2017).

Nevertheless, since we were dealing with descendants of Lope and not just of Poe, we also discover some resistance to these trends. Certain writers with an MFA appearing in the 2017 'Bogotá 39' list adopt a more transgressive approach, which can be seen to return somewhat to the more experimental approaches of Boom-generation novels. Giuseppe

Caputo's *Un mundo huérfano* (2016, *An Orphan World*), for instance, is a Caribbean-Colombian nod to Reinaldo Arenas's or Manuel Puig's queer literature. Monica Ojeda's *Nefando* (2016) and *Mandibula* (2018, *Jawbone*), although responding to the workshop poetics, manifest new approaches to horror through surrealism.

Beyond the lists and the MFAs, we also see a strong movement toward a complex literature that pays homage to previous generations while seeking innovation. Fernanda Melchor, for instance, who does not hold an MFA degree, but who attended Mexican literary workshops, was inspired by the complex language, structure, and perspective of García Márquez' *El otoño del patriarca* (1975, *The Autumn of the Patriarch*), to write her *Temprada de huracanes* (2017, *Hurricane Season*), one of the most acclaimed Hispanic novels of the last decade. Likewise, the Colombian author Carolina Sanín, who holds a PhD in Hispanic literature and who has also imparted workshops in Colombian universities, published *Somos luces abismales* (2018, *We Are Abyssal Lights*), a book that mixes poetry, fiction and testimony and thus escapes the cage of the 'show don't tell' rule. Similarly, Samanta Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate* (2014, *Fever Dream*) seeks to emulate, in the first person, the voice of a poisoned and delirious woman, breaking with realism in the process.

While for a long time Hispanic literature remained attached to the Romantic view of the writer-as-genius, the field changed in the late-twentieth century toward a more work-driven poetics. This change, due to both US literary and MFA influence, implied not only the acceptance of writing as a learnable trade, but also a compliance with the poetics developed in Anglophone workshops in the twentieth century. Nonetheless, even if Hispanic literature has shown an inclination toward these types of poetics and seemed to submit to the domination of Anglophone literature in a global market, the change has not been complete. The phenomenon has also inspired a form of resistance and cooperative exchanges, leading to a re-invigoration of Hispanic literature.

The popularity of MFAs of creative writing in Spanish, and the increasing number of graduates, will certainly continue to expand the industry of creative writing in the Hispanic field, and will likely continue to propagate the North American workshop style on both sides of the Atlantic. But, while the majority of graduates may perpetuate the now-trite imperatives of workshop poetics, a freer approach is possible, as the Hispanic programs continue to develop their own identities and MFA syllabi. Fostering new spaces for literary experimentation, they may in

turn influence the Anglophone field of production as well. As Lope, or the Boom authors did before, the current generation of new Hispanic writers may well take the advice of ‘show don’t tell,’ and decide to lock it in with six keys, while proceeding to write in their own ways.

## NOTES

1. This chapter will refer to the literature produced in all the Spanish-speaking regions, that is to say, largely Spain and Latin America. Even if it is possible to distinguish between different national traditions, or at least to draw a line between Latin America and Spain, due to historical reasons (i.e., colonialism and the existence of interconnected literary centers, mostly organized around Spain, Mexico, and Argentina), the Hispanic literary field can be considered as a whole.
2. The underrepresentation of women in the present article is due to the still strong patriarchal domination of the Hispanic literary world. The reception of the Boom generation, for instance, considered female authors as second-class members of the movement. Recent scholarship has brought back some of them into consideration, for example, the Mexican writer Elena Garro (1916–1998) who was for a long time mainly regarded as the wife of Octavio Paz now receives a more important place in the canon.
3. In various essays, Darío condemns the literature of the Spanish Peninsula as archaic, as though having remained in the seventeenth-century Golden Age, instead favoring the influence of American and French literature, and calling for a brotherhood of writers, even defending the concept of writing as work.
4. Fuguet’s choice of the name McOndo is a wordplay between Macondo, the fictional town of García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and the prefix Mc- associated with McDonald’s and the culture of late capitalism to which he wanted to belong.
5. Both ‘Bogotá 39’ lists only incorporate Latino authors and have a strong bias toward Colombian writers and culturally aligned countries such as Mexico and Peru. *Granta*’s list is shorter, with only 22 writers, giving privilege to the Spanish and Argentinean authors. None of the lists is inclusive in terms of gender and ethnic diversity.
6. In terms of international impact, Roberto Bolaño (1953–2003) was the best-known Hispanic writer after Gabriel García Márquez in the US and Europe. A combination of sociological and literary circumstances, as well as its literary quality, made his posthumous novel *2666* (2004) a US best seller in 2008 (see Corral and Andrews).

7. Besides Díaz, there are two other authors with MFAs in Script Writing, a more accepted line of study in the Hispanic field, given the novelty of the medium.
8. In some countries such as Mexico, the role of the State as grant provider is relevant. Nonetheless, it is not systematic throughout the Hispanic literary field.
9. Pierre-Michel Menger in *Le travail créateur* refers to the Pareto Law to describe income in artistic fields, that is 20% of artists have 80% of the total global revenue (Menger 2009, pp. 268–343).
10. For instance, the Cuban Revolution (1959), the Dominican Civil War (1965), the Argentina’s National Re-organization Process (1976–1983), the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile (1973–1990), among others.
11. Cf. “ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates / 2013–2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates”, 2017; “Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin: 2010 / 2010 Census Summary File 1”, 2010; “Race and Hispanic or Latino: 2000 / Census 2000 Summary File 1 (SF 1) 100-Percent Data”, 2000.
12. This field was constructed in the twentieth century, primarily on the storytelling of the immigrant experience (Mukherjee 2011).
13. James Wood is one of the New Yorker’s literary critics who hassled the workshop “esthetics and the world literature” in recent years.
14. I consulted on the online catalogs of: La Central and La Casa del Libro (Spain); Fondo de Cultura Económica and Gandhi (Mexico), and El Ateneo (Argentina).
15. As Levy points out, the workshop industry not only produces writers, but also creates skilled readers who will become the next buyers of short stories and novels (Levy 1993).

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# Work and the Writing Life: Shifts in the Relationship Between ‘Work’ and ‘The Work’ in Twenty-First-Century Literary-Advice Memoirs

*Elizabeth Kovach*

**Motto:** In capitalism, where labor manifests as a distinct social category, an activity distinguished from other activities (especially art) and as one of the defining features of human existence, the means and methods of labor cannot help determining the shape and character of art. (Bernes 2017, p. 34)

Recent examples of literary advice related to the writing life reevaluate the relationship between ‘work’ in terms of labor performed for a wage or salary, domestic chores, and family responsibilities, and ‘the Work’ of a creative pursuit performed for reasons beyond material necessity.<sup>1</sup> The theme of how to manage and balance the demands of ‘work’ with the desire to pursue ‘the Work’ has long been a staple within the literary advice genre. Dorothea Brande’s *Becoming a Writer* (1934)

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and *Wake up and Live!* (1936), for instance, position writing and other creative pursuits as acts of living that stand in opposition to the necessity of making a living. More recently, however, a number of publications on ‘the writing life’ have begun to complicate this opposition, challenging the dichotomy of work vs. writing life and re-conceptualizing the literary advice genre therewith. Such a shift can be traced through readings of Annie Dillard’s 1989 classic *The Writing Life*, Deborah Levy’s *Things I Don’t Want to Know* (2013) and *The Cost of Living* (2018), and Alexander Chee’s *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel* (2018). While Dillard reinforces stereotypical boundaries between ‘work’ and ‘the Work,’ Levy and Chee jumble these fields. They portray the dissolution of the divide between work, personal, and writing lives, thereby also disrupting generic patterns in issuing literary advice. The blurring of fields of activity goes hand-in-hand with a blending of literary advice with memoir.

I contend that these developments take shape in relation to dominant notions of the ideal, white-collar worker in the Anglo-American contexts of the writers at hand. Literary advice on the relationship between ‘work’ and ‘the Work’ and the genre itself thus reflect not merely literary trends but also more broadly the means and conditions of labor under capitalism for a specific milieu, which in the case of my examples is the white-collar ‘creative class’ (see Florida [2002] 2012). Jasper Bernes, quoted in the epigraph to this article, presents a similar argument in *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* (2017), his study of the relationship between US-American poetic expression and postindustrial capitalism since the 1970s. Following Bernes’s premise that “the means and methods of labor cannot help determining the shape and character of art,” I suggest that Levy and Chee’s experiments with literary advice are influenced by the demands placed upon laborers within the white-collar, postindustrial economy, and the resulting effects that these demands have had on ideas about the writing life. While management discourses since the 1970s champion workers who function like writers and artists (flexibly, creatively, emotionally), Levy and Chee portray work as something not necessarily standing in opposition to their writerly modes of being. They register both the liberating and exploitative potentials of the convergence.

Before turning to Levy and Chee’s texts, which I refer to as literary-advice memoirs,<sup>2</sup> it is worth first elaborating various accounts of how artistic discourses influenced those of management and labor and vice

versa in the latter half of the twentieth century. I will then turn to the genre of literary advice, positioning the 1930s-era advice literature of Dorothea Brande, Annie Dillard's 1989 *The Writing Life*, and lastly the works of Levy and Chee in relation to these historical accounts, arguing that the contemporary literary-advice memoir is a genre particularly poised for negotiating the tensions and dissolutions between 'work' and 'the Work,' or more widely, those of labor and art, characteristic of its time.

## THE ABSORPTION NARRATIVE: LABOR TRANSFORMED BY ARTISTIC CRITIQUE AND VICE VERSA

A wealth of critical scholarship across humanities disciplines exists on the ways in which today's white-collar creative class is expected to function flexibly, creatively, and emotionally. In *Literature and the Creative Economy* (2014), Sarah Brouillette demonstrates how widely opinions on such developments differ by contrasting the work of urban-studies scholar Richard Florida, who wholeheartedly celebrates "the rise of the creative class" ([2002] 2012), with that of theorists such as Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, and others associated with the post-Marxist autonomist movement, who position the same historical developments as producing new forms of worker exploitation and diminishing the autonomy of art.<sup>3</sup> Despite clashing opinions about the effects of management discourses and demands placed on creative workers, all are more or less in agreement about the development of this situation, the historical narrative of which is famously chronicled by sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* ([1999] 2005). Boltanski and Chiapello establish a link between artistic critiques and political protests of the 1960s and 1970s with themes that appear in neo-management literature in response, namely identifying qualities such as:

autonomy, spontaneity, rhizomorphous capacity, multitasking (in contrast to the narrow specialization and division of labour), conviviality, openness to others and novelty, availability, creativity, visionary intuition, sensitivity to differences, listening to lived experience and receptiveness to a whole range of experiences, being attracted to informality and the search for interpersonal contacts. (Boltanski and Chiapello [1999] 2005, p. 97)

Boltanski and Chiapello find that “these themes,” which were promoted by the political and artistic left in the 1960s and 1970s in their critiques of capitalism, were appropriated by corporate management discourses in an effort to boost worker morale. In other words, they claim that these themes were absorbed by the very “forces whose destruction they were intended to hasten” (ibid.). Like the autonomists, Boltanski and Chiapello read this absorption largely in a negative light, while Florida celebrates the integration of a ubiquitous brand of creativity into the lives of what he considers an expansive and ever-expanding class of workers.

According to this narrative, as the ideal white-collar worker is increasingly encouraged to adopt the dispositions and practices stereotypically associated with artists, the social role of the artist loses distinction. It is this aspect of Boltanski and Chiapello’s account that Bernes highlights in his discussion of poetic expression in relation to labor. He notes how *avant garde* artistic movements ranging from “Fluxus and Happenings to the Situationist International,” despite fundamental differences among them, all strove for a “total negation of labor by art, a revolutionary conquest of the workday by a generalized aesthetic activity no longer confined to the limited arena claimed by art” (Bernes 2016, p. 763). Once management discourses cultivated their own versions of “a generalized aesthetic activity” in the workplace, the critical potential of the artist was challenged—“[t]he language of art could provide a challenge to the workplace only because the workplace was defined as exclusive of art” (Bernes 2017, p. 35). Bernes suggests that poetic experiments of the post-World War II-era “pick up on a mood, a structure of feeling, about the alienation of modern work and give such a mood a set of themes and ideas from which the wave of resistance at the decade’s end borrows” (ibid., p. 10). Once management developed a response to this resistance, poets began experimenting from a new position in which they consciously displayed their own absorption within capitalism’s cultural logic. For example, Bernes discusses the Flarf poetry movement initiated in 2001, which in the words of Flarf poet Drew Gardner was about “fucking around with Google on the man’s dime” (cited in Bernes 2017, p. 157). Flarf poems were often constructed according to simple protocols: “[Y]ou search Google for 2 disparate terms, like ‘anarchy + tuna melt’ [and] using only the quotes captured by Google [...] you stitch words, phrases, clauses, sentences together to create poems” (Flarf poet Mike Magee cited in ibid.). Flarf is thus produced in the office, through

the use of office equipment, and during working hours. The construction of a poem involves following a set of cut-and-paste rules, and thus becomes a purely mechanical operation (apart from the creative act of inserting two words into the Google search box). In some ways, the movement is rebellious in its mission to create poetry during work and with a re-appropriation of (digital) work tools. Yet this entails foregoing the prospect of carving out space and time for writing and simply integrating poetry production into the scheme of the workday. Whether such a move is one of resignation and necessity or liberation is a question with which Flarf poets ambivalently play.

The example of Flarf discussed by Bernes emphasizes the notion of the poet operating from within the world of work. Other scholars have highlighted how the world of art is increasingly portrayed as one characterized by constant work, wherein even artists operating outside of conventional office spaces must embody the ideals of flexible, creative, and emotional investment in both ‘work’ and ‘the Work.’ Bojana Kunst, in *Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (2015), offers an illustrative example in her discussion of the introduction to a catalog of German artist Ina Wudtke’s work by philosopher Dieter Lesage (Kunst 2015, p. 134). Instead of describing Wudtke’s art, Lesage chronicles Wudtke’s daily activities, “which move between organization, production, dissemination, networking, the presentation of the artwork and the artist herself, in a fast repetitive rhythm” (ibid.). Far from merely concentrating on the production of art itself, Wudtke engages in a constant cycle of self-promotion, marketing activities, party planning, DJ gigs, etc., all of which feed into the images and themes of her art. In doing so, Kunst finds this *modus operandi*:

directly indicates the profound changes in the work of the contemporary artist that have been taking place over the last few decades. [...] [Lesage] shows that the open, interdisciplinary, unstable and flexible character of contemporary artistic work is not only an aesthetic quality but one deeply connected to the ways [in which] the works are produced. (ibid., p. 135)

Like the example of Flarf, the means and conditions under which Wudtke’s art is produced are inscribed into the art itself. The demands imposed upon the artist-as-flexible-worker inevitably translate into the aesthetic quality of ‘the Work’ itself. Kunst suggests that this dynamic affects creative workers beyond the world of art, including her own

academic work. In the introduction to *Artist at Work*, she writes that the book

contains a series of reworked essays I'd already published elsewhere. I wanted to retain the diffusion and variety of texts, and not deny conditions in which this theoretical work was created: as a fruit of the very conditions of production and methods of work that I critically reflect on. (ibid., p. 4)

The conditions of academic labor under which Kunst writes are themselves inscribed into the structure and theoretical argumentation of her book. Kunst leaves a degree of what she describes as “diffusion and variety” among the book’s chapters to highlight this fact. In this, as well as in the examples of Flarf and the work of Wudtke, the blurring of boundaries between the spaces, practices, and products of ‘work’ and ‘the Work’ are positioned as consequences of the historical influence of artistic critique on the styles and management of labor, which in turn have impinged upon the autonomy of art. Work and art are not conceived of as distinct modes of activity but rather converge through the imperatives to perform and produce flexibly, creatively, and emotionally in both making a living and engaging in creative pursuits.

This dynamic, a purported consequence of labor’s transformation through artistic critique and vice versa, is also put on display in contemporary instances of literary advice, which prove to be particularly stark examples of what scholars such as Boltanski and Chiapello, Florida, the autonomists, Bernes and Kunst have described theoretically and in relation to poetry and art. In the works of Levy and Chee, literary advice is blended with memoir. They are not simply guidebooks for or depictions of ‘the writing life’; instead, they embed such conventional themes within accounts of the existential, emotional, familial, economic, and political conditions under which the writing life is pursued. The composition of such life-writing memoirs is characterized by “diffusion and variety,” to borrow Kunst’s words for describing her academic book. They depict the spaces and moments that surround the production of works of fiction, turning such depictions of process into creative projects themselves. These two ways of ‘doing work’ then converge on various levels and in ways that challenge established literary-advice genre conventions of the twentieth century.

## VISIONS OF AUTONOMOUS PRODUCTION: TWENTIETH-CENTURY MODELS OF LITERARY ADVICE

Literary advice of the twentieth century often upholds a notion of the writing life as one of autonomous expression freed from the activities and constraints of making a living. From Dorothea Brande's books published in the 1930s, to Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life* of the late 1980s, the life of a writer is described as offset from the world of work and everyday life. Such accounts by no means romanticize the writing life. On the contrary, Dillard's work in particular is very much about exposing the creative frustrations and social isolation writers often face: "It should surprise no one that the life of the writer – such as it is – is colorless to the point of sensory deprivation. Many writers do little else but sit in rooms recalling the real world" (Dillard [1989] 2013, p. 44). In this depiction of "colorless" life, a clear separation between the writer and "the real world" is forged that implies an autonomous form of production, a unique form of labor devoted to 'the Work.'

Dorothea Brande, in publishing *Becoming a Writer* (1934), played a pioneering role in establishing this mode of literary advice by turning away from technical advice and focusing rather on popular-psychological advice related to the emotional hurdles a writer faces. Brande places emphasis on that which is "*anterior* to any problems about story structure or plot building, and that unless the writer can be helped past it there is very likely to be no need for technical instruction at all" (Brande [1934] 1981, p. 29).

Such "anterior" issues are largely psychological in nature, and *Becoming a Writer* addresses the ambivalences that aspiring writers grapple with in "writing at all," offering advice on how to overcome fears of failure and free the creative mind. For Brande, becoming a writer involves balancing the practical and creative sides of oneself: "*it is possible to train both sides of the character to work in harmony, and the first step in that education is to consider that you must teach yourself not as though you were one person, but two,*" both a technical craftsmen and an inspired artist (Brande [1934] 1981, p. 44). That the writer must live as these two selves reinforce the notion that there is a distinction between the worlds of everyday life and work, on the one hand, and the world of artistic creation, on the other hand.

In its largely therapeutic, pop-psychological tenor, Brande's work participated in the rise of the self-help book industry of its time, which

readily borrowed insights from psychoanalysis. *Wake Up and Live!* (1936) repeats many of the points of advice she develops for writers but generalizes them for a broader audience. *Wake Up and Live!* directly addresses the tensions between ‘living’ and ‘making a living’ which, according to Brande, apply not merely to ambivalent writers and artists but essentially to anyone who is not following their passion:

[The] necessity to fall upon the first work we can find is alone enough to explain why so few of us ever manage to bring our plans to fruition. Often, at first, we have a firm intention of not losing sight of our real goal, in spite of the fact that we must make a living at uncongenial work. [...] But the nine-to-five work is tiring and exacting; it takes super-human strength of character to go on working alone when the rest of the world is at play, and when we have never had any evidence that we should be successful if we continued, anyway. And so without realizing it we are swept into the current of the Will to Fail. (Brande [1936] 2012, p. 20)

Brande addresses the willpower it takes to pursue a passion in one’s free time, when the rest of the world “is at play” and the “nine-to-five” grind leaves little energy in reserve. Her key to resist getting swept into such a cycle is to “[a]ct as if it were impossible to fail,” pushing away ambivalences and fears that prevent one from beginning at all (ibid., p. 49). Like in her writing advice, Brande is not interested in advising readers on technicalities of ‘the Work’ but rather on emotional hurdles and behavioral strategies for building motivation to begin ‘living’ as opposed to simply making a living.

Brande’s work on writing/living participates in a change not only in the self-help industry, but also in the regulation of emotions under capitalism. In *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (2015), Eva Illouz discusses how self-help gurus and popular psychologists of the 1930s began framing self-actualization as vital to people’s health (see Illouz [2007] 2015, pp. 43–44). Such discourses also penetrated management theory from the 1930s to the 1970s, which, according to Illouz, “converged around one leading cultural model: that of ‘communication,’” which was emphasized to ensure the alignment of emotional investments among workers (ibid., p. 18). Thus, just as Brande turned away from content focused on writing technique and toward the emotions of aspiring writers, so too did popular psychologists and management theorists begin to focus on the regulation of worker emotions. Such

developments were certainly forerunners to the narrative of convergence related to artistic critique and management discourses since the 1970s, as discussed in the previous section. At this stage, however, work was still readily framed as an activity distinct from art. The writer, in Brande's terms, carves out space and time for a second self, with an autonomous field for creative production.

Such a conception of the writer as someone who sequesters time and space away from the world of work is maintained decades later in Dillard's *The Writing Life* (1989). Here Dillard describes her writing process, not from a technical but rather from an emotional and atmospheric standpoint. She depicts the remote cabins, library rooms, and beach houses she has occupied over the years while devoting her full energies to writing. For instance, she recounts a period spent in Virginia writing *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, for which she won a Pulitzer Prize, as an "idyll":

I slept until noon, as did my husband, who was also writing. I wrote once in the afternoon, and once again after our early dinner and walk. During those months, I subsisted on that dinner, coffee, Coke, chocolate milk, and Vantage cigarettes. I worked till midnight, one, or two. (Dillard [1989] 2013, p. 11)

She does not reveal how she and her husband have the means to focus solely on writing, but they are clearly in positions to do so, unencumbered by care-giving responsibilities or the necessity to make a living and adopting a daily routine tailored exclusively to furthering 'the Work.' As Dillard elaborates:

Putting a book together is interesting and exhilarating. It is sufficiently difficult and complex that it engages all your intelligence. It is life at its most free. Your freedom as a writer is not freedom of expression in the sense of wild blurting; you may not let rip. It is life at its most free, if you are fortunate enough to be able to try it, because you select your materials, invent your task, and pace yourself. (ibid.)

The freedom Dillard describes is that of unalienated work: the production of something determined solely by its maker, who sees herself reflected in the outcomes of her efforts. The freedom and the sense of fulfillment this brings, as Dillard indicates, is reserved for the "fortunate" who are able to "engage all [their] intelligence" to a single creative task. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, a work of nonfiction in which Dillard mixes memoir



with observations about nature and religion, is largely inspired by Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). Thoreau famously describes his year living in a small cabin at Walden Pond in an effort to seek an unalienated mode of existence. In *The Writing Life*, Dillard reveals that not just the themes of her writing projects but also the conditions under which she works mirror the tenets of *Walden*. The writerly life is conceived of as requiring a degree of physical and social isolation through which autonomous expression—"life at its most free"—can emerge.

While Brande's writing advice is framed as motivational self-help directed at aspiring writers, Dillard's *The Writing Life* is a reflective account of what it means to work as a writer, more of a meditation than a handbook. In both cases, however, the work of writing is sequestered to autonomous space and time. Brande's readers are encouraged to cultivate second selves through a commitment to regular writing sessions protected from the bustle of the everyday 'rat race' and the necessity of making a living. Dillard, rather, describes a privileged situation: the life of a writer who has the good fortune to devote her full energy to creative projects. These conceptions of the writing life and its cultivation are premised upon the idea of autonomous expression that is spatially and temporally sequestered from work performed out of necessity. Conditions of labor do not (or should not) impress upon 'the Work.' In the recently published literary-advice memoirs of Deborah Levy and Alexander Chee, however, the boundaries between living and making a living are blurred, recasting ideas of the writing life.

This shift likely reflects a general blurring of cultural boundaries between the two categories that took hold most pervasively near the end of the twentieth century. Self-help publications and therapeutic discourses pertaining to inspired, creative work, for instance, did not fully penetrate corporate cultures until the end of the twentieth century. As Illouz reports in *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* therapeutic discourses in the US "emerged in the relatively short period from World War I to World War II" but first "became both solidified and widely available after the 1960s," particularly within the management philosophies and official languages of "the American corporation" (Illouz 2008, p. 15). Micki McGee states in *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (2005) that it was not until the 1990s that "the idea of the artist as an exemplar for the postindustrial worker" was thematized most explicitly in widely read self-help books such as Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way at Work* (1998) and Laurence G. Boldt's *Zen*

*and the Art of Making a Living* (1992) (McGee 2005, p. 128). Levy and Chee's memoirs were thus published at a time when the white-collar worker-as-artist (and the inverse) had become a mainstream, established notion in the fields of self-help and, most generally, within corporate life. This could explain why a notion of artistic life separated from the demands of making a living begins to disappear in writing-advice memoirs of the new millennium.

### CAUGHT BETWEEN 'WORK' AND 'THE WORK': LITERARY-ADVICE MEMOIRS OF LATE CAPITALISM

In their accounts of writing life in the twenty-first century, Deborah Levy and Alexander Chee reflect upon their individual positions of vulnerability, not simply as creative workers of late capitalism but also in terms of gender, sexuality, and race. Deborah Levy's *Things I Don't Want to Know* ([2013] 2014), subtitled *A Response to George Orwell's 1946 Essay 'Why I Write,'* and *The Cost of Living* (2018) are decidedly feminist accounts. These literary-advice memoirs respectively describe a trip taken to Majorca to write in a hilltop hotel and the reorganization of Levy's life in London as a mother and writer after divorce. Both mix reflections on the writing life with personal anecdotes and political convictions. Levy structures *Things I Don't Want to Know* according to the four categories that George Orwell cited as his reasons for writing: "political purpose," "historical impulse," "sheer egoism," and "aesthetic impulse" ([1946] 2019, n.p.). Under these rubrics she describes, among other things, the incarceration of her father in apartheid South Africa, which greatly impacted her awareness of injustice, and her adolescence in England following her parent's divorce, during which she embraced a bohemian fashion sense and became passionate about the idea of becoming a writer. These personal anecdotes are framed as memories recalled in conversation while in Majorca. She has brought notes with her and mentions her unpublished novel, *Swimming Home*, the work she has presumably come to work on (Levy [2013] 2014, p. 106, the novel was published in 2011). Her account of 'why I write' follows the general spirit of Orwell but with feminist interventions along the way. For instance, she speculates that:

Perhaps when Orwell described sheer egoism as a necessary quality for a writer, he was not thinking about the sheer egoism of a female writer. Even the most arrogant female writer has to work overtime to build an ego that

is robust enough to pass her through January, let alone December. (*ibid.*, p. 17)

By discussing her position as a specifically female writer, Levy enters a lineage of feminist writers such as Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde, who have discussed the politics of their writing as giving voice to positions of oppression in respective works such as *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985* (1986) and *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984). Such accounts place writing as an activity embedded in everyday experience and by necessity politically engaged. Levy's work is more akin to this tradition than to Dillard's unproblematic account of the pursuit of writing—a result of racial and a certain degree of financial privilege.

When recalling her experience raising small children, Levy similarly transitions into feminist argumentation, recalling gatherings of mothers at the playground, she writes:

Like everything that involves love, our children made us happy beyond measure – and unhappy too – but never as miserable as the twenty-first century Neo-Patricharchy made us feel. It required us to be passive but ambitious, maternal but esoterically energetic, self-sacrificing but fulfilled – we were to be Strong Modern Women while being subjected to all kinds of humiliations, both economic and domestic. (*ibid.*, p. 15)

In her listing of the opposing traits that she finds women of her milieu are expected to embody, Levy suggests that “Strong Modern Women” of the twenty-first century struggle endlessly to meet impossible demands. This description echoes the way theorists critical of contemporary labor conditions describe demands placed on white-collar workers irrespective of gender. In fact, transformations in white-collar labor in late capitalism have often been observed as ‘feminizations’ of work. Donna Haraway, for example, writes in her “Cyborg Manifesto” that:

Work is being redefined as both literally female and feminized, whether performed by men or women. To be feminized is to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labor force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to time arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day; [etc.]. (Haraway cited in Hicks 2009, p. 8)

Heather Hicks provides this quote from Haraway's manifesto in *The Culture of Soft Work: Labor, Gender, and Race in Postmodern American Narrative* (2009), arguing that the postmodern era has witnessed a convergence between "developments at the economic and administrative levels of [...] work and the historical conventions of femininity," in which stereotypically feminine attributes of "intuition, fluidity, faith, and emotion" have developed into prominent watchwords for white-collar laborers (ibid.). This adds another layer to the convergence narrative discussed earlier, in which the demands of the political, artistic left are appropriated by management discourses. Such discourses also idealize flexible modes of work that have historically been required of women.

The writing life described by Levy incorporates these themes. In *The Cost of Living*, the time and space she has for writing must be fought for among all of her other responsibilities following her divorce and move into a rundown apartment with her teenage daughter. Various activities encroach upon and enfold into one another: "When I wasn't writing and teaching and unpacking boxes, my attention was on mending the blocked pipes under the basin in the bathroom" (Levy 2018, p. 30); "As I battled moths [...] [a]n idea presented itself. To unfold any number of ideas through all the dimensions of time is a great adventure of the writing life. But I had nowhere to write" (ibid., pp. 40–41). The juggling act of maintaining a household, versus thinking and writing illustrated by these excerpts varies drastically from the 'idyll' that Dillard describes in *The Writing Life*. Without the luxury of devoting her full energies to creative pursuits, Levy must flexibly pass between tasks, continuously switching gears.<sup>4</sup>

Despite such obstacles, Levy does not lament her circumstance. She argues that the freedom she gains as a woman and a writer goes hand in hand with the various demands of everyday life. The combination of both sides becomes a source of invigoration, as she reflects "I was thinking clearly, lucidly; [...] I had energy because I had no choice but to have energy. I had to write to support my children and I had to do all the heavy lifting. Freedom is never free" (ibid., p. 22). Levy thus writes not simply out of inspiration but most acutely out of necessity. As material pressures fuel her creativity, these circumstances are brought into relation with an idea of freedom throughout the memoir, for instance when Levy states: "I was alone and I was free. Free to pay the immense service charges for an apartment that had very little service and sometimes not even basic utilities. Free to support my family by writing on a computer

that was about to die” (ibid., p. 92). Her freedom does not entail an escape from but rather an investment in the demands of everyday living. Such a conception of the writing life as enmeshed with all various other labors departs from the autonomy enjoyed by Dillard and championed by Brande. While a book like *Wake Up and Live!* suggests that the pursuit of one’s passion, or true ‘living,’ represents a departure from merely earning a living, Levy resists such a clear-cut opposition. “The cost of living,” her book’s title, entertains the blending of freedom with constraint, as it can be read in two ways: the cost of living the life of a wife, mother, and eventual *divorcée* on her creative ambitions, and the cost of pursuing the writing life on all of her other roles. Such a double meaning communicates the simultaneity and contingency of costs and gains on both ends of the spectrum.

Levy eventually finds ways to carve out more substantial space and time for her writing. A friend offers a garden shed made habitable in winter by a space heater, which Levy frequents for writing time sequestered from other demands. This small measure allows her to be more productive, though Levy also acknowledges that she has quite simply chosen a life in which exclusive devotion to ‘the Work’ is impossible. She contrasts her choices with those of Simone de Beauvoir, who rejected an invitation by her lover Nelson Algren to move to New York and start a family, writing that she could not “live just for happiness and love” and give up “writing and working” (ibid., p. 98). Levy finds that in her attempt to fit various pursuits into one life, “[s]he [de Beauvoir] was my muse but I was certainly not hers” (ibid., p. 95). *The Cost of Living* is thus a literary-advice memoir that in many ways focuses on the issue of work/life balance so ubiquitously discussed by twenty-first-century managers, workers, the self-help industry, etc. Levy’s mediation of this discourse, and her personal account of how to navigate competing demands, is the refusal of a clear opposition of terms, embracing work and life as activities and conditions that bleed into and shape one another. This is the model of, or advice on, the writing life that she offers to her readers. In doing so, however, she also embodies the ideal, white-collar worker of her time, multi-tasking between work, life, and ‘the Work’ with flexibility, creativity, and emotional investment.

Alexander Chee’s *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel* displays a similar ethos, as Chee describes his creative work as something produced out of material necessity and completed sporadically alongside his need

to make a living. The collection of essays includes reflections on childhood, coming out, dressing in drag, living in San Francisco during the AIDS crisis, the genesis of Chee's first novel *Edinburgh*, Chee's experience with mixed identity (Korean-American), the tragic death of Chee's father, his family's subsequent financial troubles, his education in writing during both university and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and his own work as a writing teacher. Two chapters, "100 Things About Writing a Novel" and "How to Write an Autobiographical Novel" interject Chee's narrative prose with lists that contain everything from practical advice to philosophical statements about the writing life. They are at once directed at the reader, potentially an aspiring writer looking for advice, and deeply personal reflections that condense Chee's own story into a series of lessons and insights.

One chapter, "The Writing Life," is an homage to Annie Dillard, who taught Chee writing while he was an undergraduate at Wesleyan University. When Chee is later accepted to the Iowa Writers' Workshop, almost all of his teachers discourage him from attending, saying that it would be a waste of time and resources for someone who should simply begin writing. But Dillard disagrees. She encourages him to go and delay his entry into the 'real world' for as long as possible. This advice aligns with Dillard's notion of the writing life presented in her book as one that exists apart from the everyday. Yet, while Chee ends up treasuring his time in Iowa, it is only when material necessity forces him into writing that he discovers his voice. After graduating from the Workshop, Chee moves to New York City and shares an apartment with his two siblings. His mother, running into financial difficulty and lacking substantial income, is unable to pay his sister's college tuition, and Chee thus embarks on a writing project that he thinks will be easy to complete and ensure a book deal, reflecting "I turned my back on the experimental novel I'd put forward, and told anyone I knew, "I'm just going to write a shitty autobiographical novel first just like everyone else, and sell it for thousands and thousands of dollars" (Chee 2018, p. 200).

Chee, therefore, sets aside his vision of an ambitious, "experimental" project and decides to tell a story based on his own experience, which he predicts will prove an easier task, all while working as a waiter to make ends meet:

The white shirt, black bow tie, and apron came to feel like a cocoon for the novel, or the writer, or both. I wrote that novel on the subway, going

back and forth to the restaurant, and sometimes I wrote it while at work – I still have a guest check with an outline that came to me while I waited for my section to be seated. (ibid., p. 116)

Faced with no other option, Chee's early life as a writer is fully entangled with his work waiting tables, so much so that he identifies his work clothes as protective of, rather than hindrances to, his novel's progress.

In the course of completing the novel and receiving significant acclaim, Chee undergoes a series of revelations. For one, he discovers that autobiographical fiction is by no means an 'easier' genre to tackle. He worked steadily for seven years before completing *Edinburgh*, so it was certainly not a source of fast income. At the same time, however, Chee recalls that "[t]he writing felt both like an autonomic process, as compulsory as breathing or the beat of a heart [...]. The novel that emerged was about things I could not speak of in life [...]" (ibid., p. 201). As he reveals near the end of the essay collection, in "The Autobiography of My Novel," the story of sexual abuse told in *Edinburgh* is based on Chee's own victimization as a child, the novel allowing him to recall memories he had suppressed and eventually leading him to seek therapy after years of emotional pain and unhealthy behavioral repetitions. Thus despite the desperate and constrained conditions under which Chee wrote, the novel's writing itself was not strained; it flowed and led Chee to profound insights as both an artist and victim of abuse. Chee ends the book with an essay entitled "On Becoming an American Writer," in which he reflects on a question asked by one of his students the day after Trump was elected president: "What is the point even of writing, if this can happen?" (ibid., p. 253) He ends the essay with an answer, stating:

Something new is made from my memories and yours as you read this. [...] All my life I've been told this isn't important, that it doesn't matter, that it could never matter. And yet I think it does. I think it is the real reason the people who would take everything from us say this. I think it's the same reason that when fascists come to power, writers are amongst the first to go to jail. And that is the point of writing. (ibid., p. 275)

His ultimate word of writing advice, composed in a state of shock following the election, is about political purpose. According to Chee, even the deeply personal, autobiographical novel can cause shifts in thinking and perception, and these shifts are "the point," the motivation

for writing. While the memoir is positioned as a “How to...”, Chee’s account is always embedded in his personal experience, never completely didactic or instructional. The work is thus both directed at aspiring writers and attendees of MFA programs as it is written for a wider audience of readers—the queer community; survivors of abuse; those devastated by the upsweep in right-wing populism. In his reflections on why he writes and the conditions surrounding his work, Chee, like Levy, highlights political themes.

Yet what are the politics of these memoirs, apart from the political topics they directly address? Both Levy and Chee present their writing lives as formed out of, rather than separate from, the energies they devote to making a living. They disrupt the idea of a writer working in focused, autonomous space and time upheld by Brande and Dillard. In their blending of literary advice conventions with memoir, Levy and Chee produce writing that is caught between ‘work’ and ‘the Work.’ This positioning, which in many ways reflects the conditions and demands placed on white-collar workers of their time, produces an ambivalent image of the twenty-first-century writing life, one characterized by both freedom and constraint.

### CONCLUSION: THE AMBIVALENT POLITICS OF THE LITERARY-ADVICE MEMOIR

Levy’s memoirs are fragmented and associative; Chee’s book is a collection of essays whose links from one to another are sometimes apparent, sometimes not. As such, the component parts of these projects appear as mini-projects in themselves, individually crafted and then pulled into arrangements. They exhibit degrees of “diffusion and variety” that reflect the conditions under which they were created (Kunst, 2015, p. 4).<sup>5</sup> These works, after all, have been produced in lieu of novels, for which their authors are known. In this sense, literary-advice memoirs represent time and energy spent away from ‘the Works’ that they themselves describe. They are projects that might be easier to tackle than ‘the next novel’ and more capable of being spontaneously constructed amidst the demands of everyday life, completed intermittently and between other tasks. While it is presumptuous to suggest that this is how the works were written, the assumption is based on the conditions the works themselves describe.



The literary-advice memoir as such carries implications of artistic concession and sacrifice. Its politics arise from the exposure of this fact, as Bojana Kunst argues:

Visible processes of work in the arts [...] become interesting when they [...] open up ways for representations and imagery of contemporary exploitation. In this, it is extremely important to make visible the exploitation within one's own methods of production – to work in a way that makes the production conditions visible. (ibid., p. 151)

As disclosures of the ‘work’ that surrounds and impresses upon ‘the Work,’ these mixtures of literary advice and memoir perform the function of creating “representations and imagery” of the convergences between work, art, and life characteristic of the twenty-first century with which their authors grapple. At the same time, in both the examples by Levy and Chee, this convergence is not exactly lamented. While their memoirs are positioned as having been written in lieu of other projects—namely, works of fiction—they are by no means framed as works of lesser quality or significance. In Chee’s account of writing *Edinburgh* while waiting tables and Levy’s tale of finding strength and inspiration to write out of the need to provide for her family, the pressures and demands of making a living are framed as sources of creative inspiration and productivity. For critics of the exploitative demands placed on the white-collar creative class, such accounts could come across as problematic in their acceptance of artistic production as something inherently, and at times even fruitfully, encumbered. The example of Flarf poetry that Jasper Bernes presents in *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* represents more of an embrace of such conditions in its purely mechanical form of composition, performed within the space of the office during working hours. The literary-advice memoirs discussed here do not go as far as Flarf. That is, while they describe the writing life as one shaped by “the costs of living,” they also uphold the conviction that creative expression is culturally and politically important and should not be handled facetiously.

In *The Work and the Gift*, a philosophical book that principally explores the history of the relationship between working and giving, Scott Shershaw delineates the terms ‘work’ vs. ‘the Work’ that I have been employing throughout this essay. In introducing these terms, Shershaw reflects on how the two can never be truly distinct from one another. ‘Work’ lapses into ‘the Work’ and vice versa at a moment’s notice:

On the one side, the daily exertions that are always done and never done, labors by which one lives or, as it is said, *makes a living*. On the other side, the project or the poem, the *opus*, the *oeuvre*, or the Book: those achieved or imagined totalities [...]. There will never be an absolute distinction between the two sides of this opposition, for to consider work in any sense is of course also to rebegin the Work of (theorizing) work: the unfinished labor of thinking its value, its necessity, its purpose, or its end(s). (Shershaw 2005, p. 1)

Recent literary-advice memoirs demonstrate this dynamic, as reflections on the writing life and its relationship to the demands of making a living. In their considerations and exposures of the ‘work’ that surrounds and impresses upon ‘the Work,’ these projects engage in the unfinished labor of thinking about, theorizing, and representing the writing life. These ‘side projects,’ the backstories of the production of ‘the Work,’ become ‘Works’ in themselves, rife with contradictory messages about the work of the writer in the twenty-first century. They push the literary advice genre away from technicalities and visions of artistic autonomy and toward accounts of creative production that is always compromised, subject to the demands placed on creative workers throughout the white-collar labor market of late capitalism. While the compromises may be accepted, ‘the Work’ also continues.

## NOTES

1. These terms are adopted from Shershaw’s *The Work & the Gift* (2005), to which I refer in more detail later in this article.
2. Michelene Wandor introduces the term “writing memoir” in *The Author Is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else. Creative Writing After Theory* to define any “autobiographical words of wisdom, interviews, aphorisms by famous, successful, money-earning writers,” which often function as “artistic memoirs” (Wandor 2008, p. 116). I suggest that the ‘writing-advice memoir’ could be classified as a sub-category of Wandor’s general term in which writing advice is embedded in memoirs about the writing life.
3. See chapter two entitled “Work as Art/Art as Life” (Brouillette 2014).
4. For a discussion closely related to these themes, see McGurl 2009, particularly the introduction to the book in which McGurl situates creative writing degree programs as institutions that mediate between the realms of “freedom and necessity” that are perpetually negotiated in writing lives (McGurl 2009, p. 3).

5. Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan have defined such autofictional novels as “novels of commission” that “focus on the process of writing rather than the finished, canonical work. This dereification of the novel, in turn, allows them to experience writing as a process that is already social and institutional in ways that do not necessarily exert a determining force on the final product, the finished novel” (Buurma and Heffernan 2014, p. 88). They connect contemporary novels of commission to Roland Barthes’s lecture series *Preparation of the Novel*, situated this as a forerunner to the current trend.

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## CHAPTER 16

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# “If You Can *Read*, You Can *Write*, or Can You, *Really?*”

*Jim Collins*

### INTRODUCTION

Giving advice about which books should be read, and how they should be read has been central to a humanist education, but until recently it was not referred to as “advice.” Advice was something you got from a friend or a relative about what happened in life, outside of a classroom, where a genuine literary education took place. Within the classroom, what you acquired was knowledge and analytical skills, not advice, although it could be said to function that way, in the sense that someone who knew more about a particular topic than you did was telling you how you should spend your time. BuzzFeed issues lists of books on a regular basis, framing their recommendations unabashedly as advice: “What New Book Should You Read This Winter,” “43 Books That Actually Changed People’s Lives,” etc. Within the past two decades, advice about what to read has become practically inescapable, offered by endless array of sources both inside and outside of traditional literary culture, all insisting on the unassailable validity of their expertise.

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Recently, the nature of that advice has become more action-oriented, as advice about *what to read* has given way to *how to become a writer*. The advice given in each case is fueled by the same assumption. If finding the right titles as a passionate reader has become a matter of knowing how to search and filter, then finding the requisite advice for becoming a writer is also a matter of knowing where to look in digital literary culture, and learning how to implement it. Or, to put it another way, if you can read, you can write, *right?* But can you *really*, or, even more fundamentally, should you even try to make the transition from passionate reader to accomplished writer?

In this chapter, I will focus on the advice about writing dispensed, in no uncertain terms, by three contemporary prize-winning novels, Tommy's Orange's *There There* (2018), Sigrid Nunez's *The Friend* (2018) and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We are Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). Taken together, they form a kind of referendum on what Sigrid Nunez has called "our graphomaniac age" (Nunez 2018a, p. 60). These novels offer a range of advice about writing, specifically who is entitled to write *their story*, and what *craft* may or not have to do with it. Just as fundamentally, the advice given in each novel posits imagined communities, founded on the curation of relevant literary voices. In each case, the advice dispensed is not just a matter of "how to write" but how to construct an architecture of participation in contemporary literary cultures for both readers and writer, in which reading can still matter in the twenty-first century.

## THE "ADVICIZATION" OF CONTEMPORARY READING/WRITING CULTURE

Let me begin with a few of personal anecdotes that have shaped my thinking about literary advice and how we can recognize it when we see it. I started thinking about the status of advice about reading and writing, and how it related to the practice of cultural criticism when my book, *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture* (2010) was read by some readers in a way that I had never anticipated. I thought I had written a brilliant cultural studies-style analysis of how popular literary culture had emerged between 1990 and 2010. Then I learned that the *Chicago Tribune*, in an article entitled, "Books for the Writer's Bookshelf," had named it as one of five titles that every writer should read. Imagine my surprise when I realized I had written an advice book for writers without realizing it. I took this in stride and got back

to work doing cultural analysis and then I had a second encounter that made me reflect again on the relationship between critique and advice.

I was in Belgium giving a lecture at the University of Leuven, and while there, I was asked to give a talk for a literary organization in Brussels, *Passa porta*. My audience was composed not of cultural studies scholars, but educators and bookstore operators who were committed to literacy initiatives and who had read my book as a set of strategies. I learned afterward in conversations after the talk that many of them had, in effect, instrumentalized what I had thought of as cultural critique and used it in their grant proposals for their literacy projects, which I found surprising, but deeply gratifying.

And then I began to think about how much of my teaching and writing could be thought of as advice, and the first course that came to mind was a film analysis course that I had taught when I was in graduate school at the University of Iowa, the heartland of creative writing. I was in the Comparative Literature and Film studies, it was the halcyon days of French theory, and my department was one of the chief importers. I was just back from taking courses in Paris, all coked up on "High Theory," and I was teaching a course in the Saturday and Evening program to make extra money. On the first night the class met, I was surprised to learn that better than half of the students were from the legendary Writers' Workshop that was headquartered just down the hall from my office in Comp. Lit. As way of getting to know each other the first night, I asked everyone in the class why they were taking the course. I was told by the Workshop students that they wanted to learn how to write screenplays, and this was the only course offered that seemed useful for that purpose. I was, of course, disdainful of this at the time because I was offering them brilliant close analyses, shaped by what I had learned about film semiotics in seminars with Christian Metz and company, and they just wanted to instrumentalize it as a "How-to" course. It turned out well enough in the long run, because at the end of the semester they assured me that they had learned tons of useful stuff for their craft. Reflecting back, I had to come to terms with an uncomfortable question—were the Workshop students wrong to be treating my course as literary *advice*?

I offer these anecdotes because rethinking the relationship between advice and education is essential, if we hope to take the full measure of the explosion of literary advice giving that continues to expand outward, both on- and offline, throughout contemporary literary culture. Relentless, omnipresent advice-giving has become one of the distinguishing features

of day-to-day in digital cultures, but it is also one of the least appreciated in critical terms. There is an increasing body of research devoted to how recommendations for book buying and television watching have become so central to Amazon and Netflix's mobilization of algorithm-based data analytics, that it has become a standard feature of digital capitalism (Schiller 1999; Striphas 2015; Zuboff 2019). As important as this work is, it needs to be complemented by a broader understanding of advice-mania that can take into account more than the digital sales pitches and the forms of surveillance they entail. While advertising appeals framed in terms of what *you might also like* have obviously become the new normal for on-line advertising, advice-giving and list-making have also become robust forms of popular culture in the twenty-first century. Enjoyed by a massive global audience, the public performance of advice giving as taste-making has become a form of entertainment unto itself, subsuming formerly distinct pleasures such as reading, watching, and listening into the sheer delight of curating, just for you and your imagined communities.

What needs to be taken into account is how advice-giving has become as the very stuff of literary fiction, as the acts of curation and creation become ever more interdependent. Perhaps the most concise way for me to explain what I mean by "curation" here is in terms of what museumologists refer to as "the hang" of a museum exhibition, namely, the arrangement of individual pieces on display and the logic that determines the way they are deployed in reference to each other. Allusions have been a standard feature of literary texts for centuries and the ubiquity of intertextual frames was a distinguishing feature of classical postmodern textuality. What distinguishes the overtly curatorial dimension of the novels by Orange, Nunez and Vuong in the foregrounding, not of the individual intertext, but rather the attempt to depict "the hang" of contemporary literary writing, and in the process, to make it the site for extended reflections on what it means to be a writer that *matters*.

### CURATING ADVICE IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

The popular literary culture that emerged in the late 1990s depended on a number of interdependent factors that formed a unique media ecology, book clubs (actual, online, and televisual), literary bestsellers, Amazon.com, high-concept adaptation films, "superstore" bookstore chains, etc. The reading cultures generated by that media ecology were



unified by certain overarching values, none more significant than the empowerment of amateur readers, who were driven by the conviction that *passionate* reading was equal, if not superior to the bloodless *close* reading of professionalized readers. While the latter required a long apprenticeship, the former was guided by a self-imaging process that was fueled by a reading advice industry that provided confidence-building measures to validate that reading. The empowerment of readers depended on *knowing where to look* for both expertise and validation. Or, to put it another way, quality reading depended less on native intelligence or a university education, and more on the ability to search and filter in pursuit of the information needed to maximize the pleasures of passionate reading.

Many of the factors that led to a fundamental recalibration of the relationship between amateur and professionalized reading have also destabilized the relationship between amateur and professional writing. One of the other central features of the popular literary was the blurring of the line between self-help books and literary fiction especially in novels such as Melissa Banks’s *The Girls’ Guide to Hunting and Fishing* (1999), Karen Joy Fowler’s *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2004) and Jennifer Kaufman and Karen Mack’s *Literacy and Longing in LA* (2006). Books advocating the therapeutic values of reading have continued to appear on a regular basis, including Alberto Manguel’s *Packing My Library: An Elegy and Ten Digressions* (2018); Burkhard Spinnen’s *The Book: An Homage* (2018); Jo Steffens and Matthias Neuman’s collection *Unpacking My Library* (2017); *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (2017) by Deidre Shauna Lynch; *The Book Lovers’ Anthology: A Compendium of Writing about Books* (2017), and *The Palace of Books* by Roger Grenier. In his review of Grenier’s book, the critic for the Wall Street Journal summarizes the situation quite succinctly: “Books on reading have become as common as new diets” (Mattix 2014). The genre, which in its aspirational impetus could be regarded as a subgenre of advice (much like the contemporary literary-advice novels discussed by Kovach in this book) also includes novels that offer reasons why literary reading should be the very center of any life experience, because of their therapeutic power, as exemplified by international bestsellers such as Nina George’s *The Little Paris Bookshop: A Novel* (2016), Robin Sloane’s, *Mr. Penumbra’s 24 Hour Bookstore* (2013) and Jenny Colgan’s *The Bookshop on the Corner* (2016). The blurb for Colgan’s book at Amazon is particularly revealing. “Nina is a literary matchmaker. Pairing a reader with that perfect book is her passion [...] and also her job.”

The advice offered in recent literary bestsellers involves more than finding the appropriate significant other and/or one's true self, it now means offering advice about transforming oneself from a passionate reader to a writer. Traditionally, literary advice revolved around two questions: how to get published, and how to refine one's craft. Dozens of TED Talks and YouTube videos continue to offer this type of advice. But a comparative analysis of *There There*, *The Friend*, and *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous* reveals that within prize-winning literary novels, reflections on the act of writing now seem to be almost obligatory as a way of proving that literary writing and reading still matter. The advice offered here revolves around another set of tensions, namely what constitutes the basis of literary authority, more specifically what would serve as its justification, and who should and should not attempt to take on that role if it is to retain any value.

### TELLING YOUR STORY, OR LET'S BUILD A HOME

As I began my research for this article, I checked out the "Favorite Reads of 2018" issue of *O. The Oprah Magazine*, which is revelatory in terms of what it includes and excludes. The "Favorite Reads" list featured many of the celebrated novels and memoirs of the year, that appeared on all of the best books of the year lists, e.g., Lisa Holiday's *Asymmetry* (2018), Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage* (2018), and Tara Westover's *Educated* (2018). It also featured another title that epitomizes advice-mania culture and the lists it generates so relentlessly, James Mustich's *1,000 Books to Read Before You Die* (2018) which is described in the following terms: "If there's a heaven just for readers, this is it" (p. 76).

The same *O. The Oprah Magazine* issue included a feature article, "Writing Wrongs: A Poet Advocates Self-expression to Those Who Sorely Need It," which is essential for understanding the sort of literary advice endorsed the magazine. This feature details the writing advice given by the poet, Pamela Hart. When her son was deployed in Afghanistan, she decided to do what she could to connect with his experience and decided to conduct an online writing course for women in Afghanistan, who could not attend a traditional school without risking imprisonment or execution (the AWWP-Afghan Women's Writing Project). "The AWWP cautiously recruits participants through word of mouth. Many of the writers, particularly those in Taliban-held areas, must hide their work from their family and neighbors. Some walk for hours to use a computer at an internet café"

(Choi 2018, p. 146). Here, literary advice becomes a life-saving means of empowerment in a regime that treats women as subhuman. The value of the writing experience, if only for yourself and your community, is never questioned, and neither publishing, nor craft enter the picture.

Tommy Orange’s novel *There There* also focuses directly on the value of *telling your story* within the Native American community in Oakland, California. In terms of literary prestige, the novel was a fixture on the Best Books of the Year list (*The New York Times*, *National Public Radio*, *O The Oprah Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, *BuzzFeed*, *Entertainment Weekly*). One of the central characters, Dene Oxedene, is a young documentary filmmaker who obtains a grant from a local arts council to support his attempt to create a collection of urban Native American stories. The participants in the project tell their stories in their own words for \$200 in a story-booth he constructs, in a setting resembling the StoryCore project, which is a regular feature on National Public Radio. The impetus for this particular project is the need to fill a profound gap. When interviewed about his grant proposal, Dene tells the judges:

I’ll transcribe it while they talk, if they want, I want them to be able to say what they want, let them write, every kind of story I can collect, let them tell their stories with no one else there, with no direction or manipulation or agenda. I want them to be able to say what they want, let the content direct the vision. There are so many stories here. I know that means a lot of editing, a lot of watching, and a lot of listening but that’s just what our community needs considering how long it’s been ignored, how long it’s been invisible. [...] And this is not just qualitative data collection. I want to bring something new to the vision of the Native experience as it’s seen on the screen. We haven’t seen the Urban Indian story. What we’ve seen is all kinds of stereotypes that are the reason no one is interested in the Native story in general, it’s too sad, so sad it can’t even be entertaining. But more importantly because of the way it’s been portrayed it looks pathetic and we perpetuate that, but no, fuck that, excuse my language, because it makes me mad because the whole picture is not pathetic, and the individual people and stories that you come across are not pathetic or weak or in need of pity and there is real passion there, and rage, and that’s part of what I’m bringing to the project, because I feel that way too. (Orange 2018a, p. 40)

I have quoted this passage at considerable length for a number of reasons. First, because it establishes the stakes of this storytelling project and why

the stories will acquire a use value in aggregate. Because those stories have not been told yet, they *must be told* so the lived experiences of those Native Americans will acquire a reality that they never had before. Telling that story means using anything, but well-polished literary prose, which explains the frantic, rambling quality of the sentence structure in this passage. Orange appropriates Gertrude Stein's infamous description of Oakland "(t)here's no there there," and applies it to the Urban Native experience: there's no *there there* for them, because not only did these Native Americans lose their homeland generations ago, but also they have no stories to give their current experience some kind of *there*, which must be conjured into being through the act of telling their individual stories. No single master counter-narrative will suffice because that counter-narrative has to be gathered and curated as a collection of stories.

As Dene later tells one of the participants in his project, "That's what I'm trying to get out of this whole thing. *All put together, all of our stories*. Because all we got right now are reservation stories, and shitty versions from outdated history textbooks. A lot of us live in cities now. This is just supposed to be like a way to start telling this other story" (ibid., p. 149, emphasis added). Those voices need to be juxtaposed in order to convey the echoes and dissonances of their lived experiences, and Orange accomplishes this through an elaborate listing project in which no one voice can encompass the whole, unless the list itself is presented. This is what he does with his "Cast of Characters" list of twelve characters to begin the novel, the use of endlessly variable first-person, second-person and third-person point of view structures, and in the emphasis he places on *listing* sentences throughout the novel.

We are Indians and Native Americans, American Indians and Native American Indians, North American Indians, NDNs and Ind'ins, Status Indians and Non-Status Indians, First Nations Indians and Indians so Indian we think about that fact every single day or we never think about it all. We are Urban Indians and Indigenous Indians, Rez Indians and Indians from Mexico and Central and South America. We are Alaskan Native Americans, Native Hawaiians, and European expatriate Indians, Indians from eight different tribes with quarter-blood quantum requirements and so not federally recognized Indian kinds of Indians. We are enrolled members of tribes and disenrolled members, ineligible members and tribal council leaders. We are full-blooded, half-breed, quadroon, eighths, sixteenths, thirty seconds. Undoable math. Insignificant remainders. (ibid., p. 136)

The “undoability” of the math necessitates the list, and curation becomes a basic structuring device, justified by the storytelling imperative.

The most important lesson in terms of literary advice is that no two voices can be the same, so the stories must be told in their own words. Authority in this case is grounded in polyphonic choral terms. Where the narrator’s voice resides within the list, and how it functions, is one of the most intriguing aspects of *There There*. Like Dene, that narrator assembles his storytellers, and gives voice to the cacophony of their accounts. The narrator’s voice speaks directly to the reader only in the “Prologue” and the “Interlude.” In the latter, he offers what its perhaps the most succinct description of his project:

The wound that was made when white people came and took all they took has never healed. An unattended wound gets infected. Becomes a new kind of wound like the history of what actually happened became a new kind of history. All of these stories that we haven’t been telling all this time, that we haven’t been listening to, are just part of what we need to heal. (ibid., p. 137)

Orange created a Spotify playlist for *There There*, but the novel itself is perhaps best understood as a playlist of voices, and it is in the creation/curation of those stories that have not been told before that Orange makes such a compelling case for his literary project.

### THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK, OR NO, YOU REALLY SHOULDN’T TELL YOUR STORY, AND THE EVILS OF GRAPHOMANIA

One notable title not included in *O the Oprah Magazine’s* Best Books of the Year is Sigrid Nunez’s *The Friend*, which is not so surprising since Nunez’s novel is a unilateral rejection of book clubs, e-literary culture, and the popular literary. The inside desk jacket for Nunez’s National Book Award winning novel describes it as: “A moving story of love, friendship, grief, healing, and the magical bond between a woman and her dog.” However, since the main character/narrator is a writing teacher who has spent most in her life in writer’s workshops of some sort or other, and the friendship referred to in the dust jacket is that between the narrator and an author, who was her first writing teacher and beloved life-long friend, and their conversations are primarily about writing, one could just

as accurately say that *The Friend* is a book about the current state of writing. Like the genre of the writing memoir, it contains extensive advice about writing inside and outside the realm of the writers' workshop in the twenty-first century.

The narrator is a self-professed product of a traditional MFA in Creative Writing education, and even as she attacks the current state of writing instruction, she remains defiantly proud to embody the values of that earlier period in the history of such programs. One of the central conundrums that the narrator returns to again and again throughout the novel is why everyone wants to be writer and thinks it is entirely possible to become one, even though most writers she knows, herself included, are miserably unhappy. The crux of the matter is the collision between the *need to tell your story* and something that called *craft*. The narrator frames this in apocalyptic terms.

But in our graphomaniac age, the reality has gotten lost. Now everyone writes like everyone poops, and at the word *gift* many want to reach for a gun. The rise of self-publishing was a catastrophe, you said. It was the death of literature. Which means the death of culture. And Garrison Keillor was right, you said: When everyone's a writer, no one is. (Nunez 2018a, p. 61)

Culture is in its death throes, not because people no longer see the value of writing, but because *everyone* thinks they can write, and their desire to tell their story has become the chief form of empowerment, rendering craft irrelevant. Nunez historicizes the act of writing in terms of two distinct periods, one in which writer's suffered endlessly *à la recherché du mot juste perdu* (in search of the word at the tip of your tongue), and the contemporary period in which identity politics have become a taste ideology which trumps anything which smacks of art for art's sake.

When the narrator moves into the first extended discussion of writing in the novel she begins with a list of literary advice. Under the heading "Lecture Notes," she cites a series of quotations by her favorite authors about the act of writing. Here again, curation is presented as the foundation of literary advice, but Nunez's list includes only canonical authors, ranging from Henry de Montherlant, to Joan Didion, Janet Malcolm, W. G. Sebald, John Updike, Natalia Ginzburg, Isak Dinesen, Virginia Woolf, etc. The quotation from Rebecca West in the list reveals just how fundamentally at odds Nunez is with the celebration of amateur reading that

has been a hallmark of popular literary culture: “Any writer worth his salt knows that only a small proportion of literature does more than partly compensate people for the damage they have suffered in learning to read” (ibid., p. 55). Damaged by reading? One of the first things she tells the reader about writing is: “If reading really does increase empathy, *as we are constantly being told that it does*, it appears that writing takes some away” (ibid., p. 8, emphasis added).

This is a remarkable statement of purpose for the novel, because here Nunez questions the value of reading, a position that has long been the core of a humanist education project as well as the very arc of the covenant for the popularization of amateur passionate reading as it has been by cultivated and expanded exponentially by celebrity book clubs run by Oprah Winfrey, Reese Witherspoon, Sarah Jessica Parker, Emma Watson, Andrew Luck, as well as *Goodreads*, *BuzzFeed Books* and an endless list of literary blogs. The *BuzzFeed* message I received this morning in my inbox sums up that unalloyed celebration of reading: “19 Tweets You’re Gonna Love if You’re Hopelessly Addicted to Books.” The language of addiction is used throughout this feature (Mmm@Merman\_Melville: “I’ve spent my whole adult life chasing the high of a scholastic book fair”), but the effects of this addiction only make you an infinitely better person. Even the phrasing of Nunez’s sentence, “as we’re constantly being told,” is an outright rejection of the literary advice industry, because it has made the idea that reading increases empathy both ubiquitous and unequivocal.

Later in the novel, we learn why the narrator questions the value of this pandemic of addictive reading—it’s not careful, critical reading. She recalls how her writer-mentor-friend was horrified by online consumer reviews and the ability that readers now had to speak directly to authors.

Some would say that, after all, one sure way for an artist to know if his work had failed was if everyone “got” it. But the truth was you had become so dismayed by the *ubiquity of careless reading* that something had happened that you had never thought could happen: you started not to care whether people read you or not. And though you know your publisher would spit in your eye for saying so, you were inclined to agree with whoever said that no truly good book would find more than three thousand readers. (ibid., p. 118, emphasis added)

The narrator here contends that the increase of careless reading is due directly to the vast expansion of addicted readers, fed by an advice industry that is tied directly to the publishing industry. The advice Nunez dispenses in the form of a remembered, or perhaps imaginary, dialogue stems in part from the new online literary culture, wherein authors have to deal directly with readers' reviews of their work when she suggests that writers always had to deal with less than informed readers, her friend responds:

"No doubt. But in the past the writer didn't have to know, the problem wasn't right there in your face."

But what about, "Trust the tale, not the teller," and how the critic's job is to save the work from the writer?"

By "critic" you know Lawrence did not mean *self-appointed*. I would love to see the consumer review that saved a book from its author. (*ibid.*, p. 117, emphasis added)

The key point here is the term "self-appointed," which suggests that what is ultimately at stake in this new literary culture, is a new set of power relations which springs from the notion that expertise is a matter of finding the "right" source for advice, and then performing your own expertise in digital public venues. It also depends on rejecting the "wrong" sort of advice, and refusing to acknowledge traditional forms of literary expertise that might challenge careless reading that is ultimately careless because it has no appreciation of literary craft.

This becomes most explicit in Nunez's novel when the narrator explains why she has given up offering advice to her would-be writers in her workshop classes. She says that for literary advice she still turns to Rainer Maria Rilke, a staple of high-end literary advice.

From the stack of books on the coffee table, I pick the Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, an assigned book for one of my courses. [...] I have read Rilke's advice so often I know it by heart. When I read the letters for the first time – at around the same age as Rilke when he wrote them – I felt that they had been written as much for me as to their addressee, that all of this wonderful advice was meant for any person who wished to become a writer. But now though the writing might strike me as more beautiful than ever, I cannot read it without uneasiness. I cannot forget my students, who do not feel at all what the Young Poet must have felt when he received them in the first decade of the last century. [...] They



say it's a lie that writing is a religion requiring the devotion of a priest. They say it's ridiculous. (*ibid.*, p. 134)

Prioritizing literary craft is itself deemed antiquated by the narrator's students,

I once had an entire class agree that it didn't matter how great a writer Nabokov was, a man like that – a snob and a pervert, as they saw him – shouldn't be on anyone's reading list. A novelist like any good citizen has to conform, and the idea that person could write exactly what they wanted regardless of anyone else's opinion was unthinkable to them. Of course literature can't do its job in a culture like that. [...] if you try talking to them about, say, art for art's sake they cover their ears, they accuse you of profsplaining. That's why I decided not to go back to teaching. Not to be self-pitying but when you're so at odds with the culture and its themes of the moment, what's the point? (*ibid.*, p. 194)

The use of "profsplaining" is especially significant here because it reveals one of the founding assumptions of "graphomaniac culture," i.e., that genuinely useful advice does not come from professors, because it does not necessarily help you tell your story, and might even stand in the way of that goal. That the author's moral/political stance should cancel out their professional expertise and any aesthetic qualities their work might offer may be interpreted, as Nunez does, in terms of excessive political correctness, but it can also be seen in terms of the prioritizing of therapeutic reading which has been at the very center of popular literary culture since the advent of the television book club. The collision of values that Nunez's narrator cites as the reason she has given up teaching, throws into sharp relief what is really at stake in the debates about who gets to be a writer. For Nunez, what causes this disconnect with her students is a conflict between what she perceives to be incommensurate regimes of values, each conceiving of the ultimate values of reading, writing, of the entire enterprise of literary culture in such diametrically opposed ways that there simply no way that everyone involved can ever be on the same page again.

## SANCTIFYING SOLITUDE AND THE DANGERS OF THE SINGLE STORY ABOUT WRITING

One of the key distinguishers between the golden age of agonized writing as religion, and the graphomaniac present according to Nunez, is the appreciation of solitude, the transcendent value for Rilke: “Seek solitude, above all seek solitude” (Rilke in Nunez 2018b, p. 133). The narrator says that she also writes poetry, but admits, “(i)t isn’t very good poetry, I know that, and I have no desire to share it. For me, writing poetry is like prayer, and prayer isn’t something you want to share with other people” (ibid., p. 71). Here Nunez’s narrator sounds remarkably like the main character in Rabih Alameddine’s novel *Unnecessary Woman* (2014), whose translations of literary masterpieces take years to produce, but are never intended to be shared with anyone else. In each case, the private conversation between author and reader that Harold Bloom and countless educators have considered to be the bedrock of reading experience, becomes the conversation between author and ever-appreciative reader who functions as a kind of authorial echo chamber. Nunez stresses this point in her National Book Award acceptance speech: “I became a writer not because I was seeking community but rather because I thought it was something I could do alone and hidden in the privacy of my own room” (Nunez 2018b).

As disdainful as Nunez’s narrator is toward the idea that anyone can become a writer, she does express admiration for one group of amateur writers she encounters. A friend of the narrator, who had been a writing student when they met in college, but then became a psychologist asks her if she will teach a writing workshop at a treatment center for victims of human trafficking. She says she agreed to do the workshop as a form of community service. The narrator expresses sincere admiration for the autofiction written by one of the women she meets in her workshop because of the lack of self-pity and the sense of humor in her writing.

Like many people I’ve met, she thinks writing saved her life. About writing as self-help you were always skeptical. You liked quoting Flannery O’Connor: Only those who with a gift should be writing for public consumption. But how rare to meet a person who thinks that they’re writing is meant to stay private. And how common to meet one who thinks their writing entitles them to not just to public consumption but fame. (Nunez 2018a, p. 60)

As in the case therapeutic writing (see Van Goidsenhoven and Masschelein in this volume), the privacy of this writing—the fact that it will *not* be shared—is precisely what sets it apart from the standard graphomania, and gives it transformative potential according to the narrator. Even though the circumstances for the act of writing would seem to be a world apart from the advice Rilke gave to the young poet he addressed almost a century ago, they are connected by this celebration of the solitary nature of writing in world gone with the socialization of reading pleasure.

While the ghost of O'Connor's belief that genuine writers are marked by a god-given gift still lingers, the narrator is willing to make an exception to that rule, but only by disconnecting writing from publishing. The alternative—writing only for publication—is incarnated for the narrator by literary advice author James Patterson whom she refers to as the best-selling author in the world.

Who, apparently of a modesty as vast as his success, believes equal success to be within easy reach of, well, anyone. Or at least anyone possessing ninety dollars for the twenty-two video lessons plus exercises he's offering, thirty day money-back guarantee. James Patterson. Always popping up, urging, coaxing, promising the world. Like the devil. (ibid., p. 144)

The choice between Rilke and Patterson as literary advice-givers throws the historical arc of teaching writing into sharp relief. The differences between the two in terms of their relationship to the publishing industry are obvious. What is more interesting here, is the way the former incarnates writing and reading for oneself as a private solitary pleasure the art of which can be discussed in a traditional workshop class, as opposed to a public, participatory spectacle of contemporary online writing and reading communities, which she demonizes in the form of Patterson's YouTube videos, his course at Masterclass.com (which he says has been taken by 60,000 students), and his online reading recommendation sites, tobereadbooks.com and readkiddoreadread.com, which feature reading lists intended for parents to help their children to discover the joys of reading together.

Nunez's insistence that the act of writing gives itself value when it is not intended to be published is diametrically opposed to advice offered in *There There*, where every Native American has a story that *must* be shared in order to assemble a body of narratives that provides a *there* for people without a narrative tradition they can call their own. The cornerstone

of Nunez's literary advice is the solitary genius blessed and cursed by her gift. The foundation for any kind of authority worthy of the name remains the solitary, singular voice, ideally in communion with itself, while the literary advice Orange offers is an alternative to the Eurocentric notion of the literary authority. Writing acquires authority as it works toward a choral effect in which all of the previously unheard voices resonate in aggregate, acquiring value as they give consolidate that community.

In her conclusion to her TEDGlobal talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says that she had acquired a taste for books by reading classic children's books written by British and American authors, but they "had an unintended consequence. That I did not know that people like me could exist in literature" (Adichie 2009). When she discovered the work of African authors, Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, "(i)t saved me from having a single story of what books are" (ibid.). She summarizes quite elegantly what is at stake in that the pursuit of that choral effect, "I would like to end with this thought: That when we reject the single story, when we realize there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise" (ibid.). Adichie's notion of "a single story" has important ramifications for understanding what is at stake in literary advice on offer in Nunez and Orange's novels.

The authors Nunez cites as her literary models are all famously solitary, and the uniqueness of artistic visions has been attested to by armies of literary scholars whose critical discourse valorizes that singularity. But one could also argue that the canonical authors she assembles and curates so deftly form "a single story" in which writers can be a *real* writers only if they have a gift, that they suffer endlessly in pursuit of the refinement of craft, and they regard their cursed calling with religious fervor—no other would-be writers need apply. Adichie makes a powerful argument about the dangers of a single story about a place, but the dangers inherent in any single story about an occupation called writing have become central to understanding the conflicting forms of advice being offered in contemporary literary fiction.

### "I WANTED TO START WITH TRUTH AND END WITH ART"

Ocean Vuong's novel, *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous*, became the literary sensation of the Summer of 2019. In the opening pages, the narrator explains that he conceives of his narrative as a letter intended for his Vietnamese-American mother, in which he will explain why

he has become a writer, or more specifically, a queer yellow body from opioid-poisoned, working-class Hartford Connecticut, who has committed himself to literary life. Since he acknowledges that his mother is illiterate, one could argue, following Nunez, that the writing is intended for himself. But as a writer who wants to give voice to those who have had no voice in American letters, his project is also remarkably similar to the one Orange takes on in *There There*: self-expression is self-preservation, and by extension, the consolidation of a community imagined into literary existence.

At the same time, Vuong’s writing style is archly literary, in the sense that it is structured around recurring poetic tropes which are the main source of cohesion for his reflections on his immigrant experience and the act of writing. Review after review comments on the sheer gorgeousness of the “poetic” prose style. In other words, in this novel craft is inseparable from “telling your story,” a point summed up neatly by Vuong, when he was a guest on the talk show *Late Night with Seth Meyers*: “I wanted to start with truth and end with art” (Vuong 2019). Vuong’s response to Meyers is entirely consistent with his unapologetic celebration of aesthetics throughout his interviews and throughout the novel. In his interview in *Poets and Writers*, he frames his emphasis on art and beauty in terms of breaking away of the strictures of immigrant literature

As a person of color, when it comes to memoir, we are seen as anthropological conduits, a vehicle of exotic information, I wanted to insist on agency as an artist, with the freedom to embellish and then claim it as my own rendition. (Gonzalez 2019)

His conception of agency depends on invention which complicates the traditional notions of community:

Writers of color are not supposed to have the musculature of an imagination. When we use it, we’re being bold, and that’s what I want to do –be bold, make things up. I’m not here to give people juicy bits of my community. I’m not a journalist; I’m an artist. (ibid.)

How Vuong constructs the architecture of participation in the literary community he imagines into being, is inevitably a complicated, sometimes even contradictory project. He acknowledges this when he addresses his mother explicitly as eventual reader of his text.

You asked what it was like to be a writer and I'm giving you a mess, I know. But it's a mess, Ma – I'm not making this up. I made it all down. That's what writing is, after all the nonsense, getting down so low the world offers you a merciful new angle, a larger vision made of small things, the lint suddenly a huge sheet of fog exactly the size of your eyeball [...] I'm not telling you a story as much as a shipwreck – the pieces floating, finally legible. (Vuong 2019, pp. 189–190)

Developing that “angle” is something only an artist can achieve, and it is the use of poetic tropes that allow him to achieve that singular angle and thereby distance his writing from journalist report. The model he invokes for his aesthetics reveals just how far his writing is from an anthropological conduit.

I'm thinking now of Duchamp, his famous “sculpture.” How by turning a urinal, an object of stable and permanent utility, upside down, he radicalized its reception. By further naming it *Fountain*, he divested the object of its intended identity, rendering it with an unrecognizable new form. I hate him for it for this. I hate how he proved that the entire existence of a thing could be changed simply by flipping it over, revealing a new angle to its name, an act completed by nothing else but gravity, the very force that traps us on this earth. Mostly, I hate him because he was right. (ibid., p. 199)

While Vuong invokes the great surrealist as the master of the aesthetic angle, he is also suspicious of craft, if it positioned as that which transcends politics,

They will tell you that great writing “breaks free” from the political, thereby “transcending” the barriers of difference, uniting people toward universal truths. They'll say this is achieved through *craft* above all. Let's see how it is made, they'll say– as if how something is assembled is alien to the impulse that created it. As if the first chair was hammered into existence without considering the human form. (ibid., p. 187)

This passage reveals the knotty aesthetics that serves as the basis for Vuong's advice about writing. Nothing is more *crafted* than his intensely poetic prose style that, by his own admission, is a mess of disparate reflections that he draws together in a final crescendo of recurring tropes of buffalos running over cliffs, monarch butterflies, and monkeys that

have functioned as consistent *leitmotifs* throughout the novel. His insistence on being able to set his imagination free to achieve his artistry, and his invocation of Duchamp’s aesthetics to redefine the function of words and things makes his advice about writing sound remarkably close to what Nunez insists is the true vocation of the writer. But his determination to depict, and thereby give voice to the invisible figures, like his mother and all the other nameless immigrant women, who work in manicure salons, he affiliates more closely with Pamela Hart’s Afghan Women Writers Project and the urban Native Americans in *There There*, the writing becoming, like it or not, a desperately needed anthropological conduit. At certain points in the novel Vuong makes extensive use of *we* and *our* to conjure that invisible community into words.

Because there are no salaries, health care, or contracts, the body being the only material to work with and from. Having nothing, it becomes its own contract, a testimony of presence. *We* will do this for decades—until *our* lungs can no longer breathe without swelling, *our* livers hardening with chemicals—*our* joints brittle and inflamed from arthritis—stringing together a kind of life. A new immigrant, within two years, will come to know that the salon is, in the end, a place where dreams become the calcified knowledge of what it means to be awake in American bones— with or without citizenship—aching, toxic and underpaid. (ibid., p. 81)

Vuong does not insist on solitude. His narration of those lives and his own struggles as writer must be shared in flamboyantly crafted visions of community and personal artistry.

## CONCLUSION: HOW TO MAKE LITERARY FICTION MATTER IN DIGITAL CULTURE?

In conclusion, I want to return to Vuong’s comment about starting with truth and ending with art. He said this in response to a question from a popular talk-show host, Seth Meyers, who now invites literary authors on a regular basis, something that would have been unthinkable on a network program until the past year. In an article entitled, “Please Welcome [...] Literature” in *The New York Times* (2019), books by authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Rebecca Makkai, Tayari Jones, and Viet Thanh Nguyen all benefited from a spike in sales after being featured on *Late Night with Seth Meyers* and Trevor Noah’s *Daily Show*. While the

literary advice offered by Orange and Vuong does include advice about the publishing industry, their books are still aggressively circulated by Penguin Random House. The issue of *Poets and Writers* which includes the story/interview with Vuong also features articles “How to Get Paid: Jobs in Publishing,” “Inside Publishing: What I Learned at Lunch with Five Hungry Agents,” along with “Writing Prompts” for writers just getting started, and numerous advertisements for MFA writing programs at a wide variety of American universities. In other words, the traditional forms of literary advice industry.

Prize-winning literary novels such as *There There*, *The Friend* and *On Earth We are Briefly Gorgeous* now need to be included in the literary advice industry, because they present a form of advice not otherwise included in the guidebooks, interviews, and How-to videos. Fiction about fiction, as such, is obviously not a new phenomenon since meta-fiction was a major literary movement in the 1960s, and novels that celebrate the joys of books and bookstores have become international bestsellers on a regular basis since the 1990s. The reflections on writing offered by Orange, Nunez and Vuong address one central question not covered by the other forms of literary advice industry, but nevertheless subtends all of the recommendations about publishing and craft: how to make literary fiction *matter* in digital culture? In an author’s reading available on YouTube, Orange says: “In the age of fake news and the age of information both happening at the same time, fiction and art in general play a really important role – to make the truth compelling enough. It’s not about information anymore. It’s about how do you make something real and the truth without having to have the interface of fact. How do you cut through all of the nonsense that is now?” (Orange 2018b).

How to make telling your story compelling enough to become something other than information inevitably involves notions of craft, but advice about the sort of craft needed to make literary writing matter involves more than tips on prose style. It means learning how to assemble and curate a chorus of voices, whether those voices be Native Americans or immigrants who have never been heard before, or the voices of literary masters invoked in order to defend a literary tradition that privileges the solitary nature of writing and reading thought to be under assault by digital culture. Tracing the conflicted nature of that advice is essential for understanding the profound tensions between *telling your story* and *craft*, as well as the tensions between the social and solitary dimensions of literary writing and reading. Ultimately, it can also bring



into sharper focus the tensions between the forces of convergence and de-convergence that define the architectures of participation in contemporary literary cultures, as they strive to offer compelling alternatives to the nonsense of the now.

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