The sources of Creative Writing
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Creative writing, it sometimes seems, is all things to all people. It’s storytelling, writing poetry, sketches and skits, but would you call writing a diary entry creative writing – most definitely not. What about so called ‘cause and effect essays’? Again, the answer is no.

So what is it that defines creative writing from all the other kinds of writing we do? Well, for a start, the answer is in the phrase – it’s creative (to create – to bring into being Collins). That doesn’t get us much further. Let’s see what the practitioners say it is – the gurus of wikipedia, no less.

Creative writing is a term used to distinguish certain types of writing from writing in general. The lack of specificity of the term is partly intentional, designed to make the process of writing accessible to everyone and to ensure that non-traditional, or traditionally low-status writing (for example, writing by marginalized social groups, experimental writing, genre fiction) is not excluded from academic consideration or dismissed as trivial. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creative_writing

Verbosity doesn’t seem to enlighten, and this entry looks as if it’s part of a UN charter. So I’ll have a go. Creative writing is that type of writing that spells out in words what can be but isn’t, what could have happened but didn’t. To quote Albert Szent-Gy-rgi, talking about discovery, which seems to be involved in the process of creative writing, it consists in seeing what everybody else has seen and thinking what nobody else has thought.

All this needs illustration – something people writing creatively do well. If, as Arthur Schopenhauer says, ‘every man takes the limit of his field of vision for the limits of the world’, creative writers go beyond their field of vision. How else would you account for the novels of Jules Verne or HG Wells, but also of Jane Austen who, we are told, never married, and lived most of her short life within her parish boundaries in the south of England.

For doesn’t creative writing stem from two areas – from your imagination, and from real life experiences recreated and tweaked to fit into a story. Again, best to illustrate.

I recently came across the name of one of my college lecturers on a website. I recalled taking part in his seminars and reading out my first seminar paper for him. He sat idly gazing out of his study window as I rattled on, but quickly spun on his chair to confront me with a point I was trying to make or had made.

“So he was listening,” I thought.

Of course, he didn’t remember me from the multitude of students who passed through that room – how could he, but I did – well!

Now, if the bulk of our memories of our past experience of living lies under layers of our subconscious, what brings one particular experience to the fore is present significance. Creative writing can give a past experience present significance.
If I were to write up my experience of reading my seminar paper to my group and my tutor, that could hardly be called creative writing. If that man who probably still sits looking out onto the green lawns outside his study while undergraduates sweat and toil with their seminar papers, were to write it up, adding what he could not recall exactly, and drawing upon his experience of just such a scenario, that would be creative writing.

In recreating that moment, embellishing it for effect, substituting a spotty youth with, let us say, a beautiful young woman, he would be taking what Marcel Proust calls the real voyage of discovery, ‘which consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes’.

Having stayed in his book lined study, and turning from the view from his window for a moment, the tutor would be drawing upon his experience of life, colouring it with his imagination, until, half way through the seminar, he writes, an irate young man rushes into the room and drags the young woman out by her hair.

It didn’t happen that way, but it could have done – it did happen that way on the page caught in a ray of sun streaming in from the window at the writer’s back. That is what creative writing is – using what God gave you and what you know to create – recreate in this case – something that can be but isn’t, what could have happened but didn’t.

The art comes in making something so believable that readers turn the page. They wouldn’t want to read about another day in the life of a university lecturer per se, but they would if it involved the solving of a murder.

Ascribing motives to somebody who never existed to explain what never occurred is at the heart of what creative writing is about. You don’t need to go hunting for big game in Kenya before you include it in a story – it just helps if you do.

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