Philosophical Inquiry in Education

The Perfectionist Call of Intelligibility: Secondary English, Creative Writing, and Moral Education

Oliver Belas

Article abstract

This article puts forward moral-philosophical arguments for re-building and re-thinking secondary-level (high-school equivalent) English studies around creative writing practices. I take it that when educators and policy makers talk about such entities as the "well-rounded learner," what we have, or should have, in mind is moral agents whose capacities for moral dialogue, judgement, and discourse are increased as a result of their formal educational experiences. In its current form, secondary English is built mainly, though not exclusively, around reading assessment; around, that is, demonstration of students' "comprehension" of texts. There is little or no sense that the tradition and practice of literary criticism upon which this type of assessment is based is a writerly tradition. By making writing practices central to what it is to do English in the secondary classroom, I argue that we stand a better chance at helping students develop their capacities for self-expression, for articulating their developing webs of belief and for scrutinizing those webs of belief. I thus wish to think about English and Creative Writing Studies in light of Cavell's moral perfectionism, and to conceive of it as an arts-practical subject and a mode by which one might, in Baldacchino's sense, undergo a process of "unlearning." My arguments are tailored to the English educational context.

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Abstract: *This article puts forward moral-philosophical arguments for re-building and re-thinking secondary-level (high-school equivalent) English studies around creative writing practices. I take it that when educators and policy makers talk about such entities as the "well-rounded learner," what we have, or should have, in mind is moral agents whose capacities for moral dialogue, judgement, and discourse are increased as a result of their formal educational experiences. In its current form, secondary English is built mainly, though not exclusively, around reading assessment; around, that is, demonstration of students' "comprehension" of texts. There is little or no sense that the tradition and practice of literary criticism upon which this type of assessment is based is a writerly tradition. By making writing practices central to what it is to do English in the secondary classroom, I argue that we stand a better chance at helping students develop their capacities for self-expression, for articulating their developing webs of belief and for scrutinizing those webs of belief. I thus wish to think about English and Creative Writing Studies in light of Cavell's moral perfectionism, and to conceive of it as an arts-practical subject and a mode by which one might, in Baldacchino's sense, undergo a process of "unlearning." My arguments are tailored to the English educational context.*

1. Introduction

This paper works from some assumptions about the moral aims of education, towards an outline of how secondary-level (ages eleven to eighteen) English studies in England might be rethought to better realize those aims. I suggest that English be reconceived as an arts-practical subject (though I am unhappy with the implicit distinction this draws between practice and, typically, theory[1]), and the poetical or compositional experience on which it is founded be restored to its study. Creative writing practices, understood as *modes of knowing* rather than means by which students *attain to forms or bodies of knowledge*, make good John Baldacchino's arguments for "unlearning," encourage a resituating of the student as a moral agent, and realize the productive, practical nature of knowledge. I attempt to rethink English studies and creative writing in light of Cavell's moral perfectionism—a discourse which turns on the equivalence of the poetical, the transformational, and the educative—and to outline the moral perfectionist potential of English studies, refashioned around creative writing practices. I take it for granted that if one wants to appreciate what makes a "great" literary work "great," it might be sensible to experiment with, to experience, the mechanics of such a work. But, as I discuss further in sections 4 and 5, I also count literary criticism—currently the paradigmatic mode for "doing" English—as a mode of creative writing, where usually that label is reserved for the writing of prose-fiction, poetry, drama, and certain types of "creative" non-fiction. "Creative writing" is a label burdened by presumptions of a false easiness,[2] and in

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[1] One is reminded of Lewin's comment that "[t]here is nothing so practical as a good theory" (1951, p. 169).
[2] This is not the same thing as "accessibility" (see Baldacchino, 2013b).

school it is generally hived off from so-called "academic English" in ways that betray the extent to which literary criticism is not understood as a tradition of creative writing; *not understood* in the dual sense that the writerly creativity of literary criticism is sometimes missed or forgotten, but also thought sometimes to be precisely *not* creative. One of my concerns is that the sense of literary criticism as a creative literary genre has been obscured by the pressures of assessment and attainment.

To the arguments presented herein there is an urgency particular to England's educational context. In what follows, it must be remembered that education in the UK is nationally devolved and centralized. In England's secondary system (roughly equivalent to junior high through to high school), for example, all students enrolled in an accredited level 3 course (secondary/high school university track courses; see Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015, p. 13) sit the same terminal exam on the same day at the same time; exams are marked and grades awarded centrally. Arts and humanities subjects have long faced public-political hostility (e.g., Morgan, 2014). But as an indication of the low regard in which creative writing practices in secondary education are held in England, consider that in the week following the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain's fiftieth annual conference, at which an early version of this paper was presented, Ofqual (2015a) (England's exams and assessment regulatory body) announced that the level 3 Creative Writing qualification was among several subjects likely to be discontinued. This announcement—which voiced concerns about development of content, level of challenge, and course distinction—was made when that qualification was less than two years old, before it could be said to be either a success or failure (in terms at least of "measurable outcomes"). The announcement also came at a time when creative writing in universities was in good standing and health, and could offer viable models for the level 3 equivalent. Despite a brief stay of execution, level 3 Creative Writing will not be taught after 2018.[3]

2. Aims of Education and Moral Perfectionism

I start from the assumption, which I draw in the first instance from John White (1977, p. 50–51), that education should be ultimately concerned with the shaping of the student, understood as an individual yet socially articulated moral agent. Questions surrounding the aims of education cannot not be of a moral nature, for such questions are always concerned with putative goods: What is good for the learner (to be or do)? To which goods does education aspire? What good is education at all? And so on. In some recent works of educational philosophy, attention turns on the agency, roles, and responsibilities of teachers and institutions, with respect to the development and guiding of students' moral thinking-and-acting.[4] I wish to think a little about how schools, teachers, and certain subject-areas might help students expand their capacities for moral deliberation and dialogue, and to consider the ways in which creative writing might help its practitioners answer such standard moral questions as "What sort of person am I?" "What sort of person might I like to be?" "What is my position—where do I stand—in my world?" For I take it that when educators and policy makers talk about such entities as the "well-rounded learner," what is, or should be, in mind are moral agents whose capacities for moral dialogue, judgement, and discourse—what we might call persons' moral vocabularies—are expanded, enriched, as a result of their formal educational experiences.

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[3] See Belas (2015a, 2015b); Stewart (2015); Ofqual (2015b).
[4] E.g., Hand (2014); Smith (2014); Tillson (2014).

My emphasis on moral vocabulary places the concerns of this paper in the orbit of Cavell's Emersonian moral perfectionism. This section will outline and offer brief commentary on Cavell's perfectionism, so that in section 5 the two strands of this paper—that dealing with creative writing, and that with moral thinking—may be brought together.

Cavell's outline of moral perfectionism begins with the identification of a widespread dissatisfaction with the world and self as they currently are, and a desire to see both transformed. "So common is this pattern of disappointment and desire" for Cavell that he "think[s] of it as the moral calling of philosophy." He names this calling moral perfectionism, characterizing it as "a register of the moral life that precedes, or intervenes in, the specification of moral theories," stipulations, or dogmas (Cavell, 2005, p. 2). To see moral perfectionism as both a moral "calling" and "register" is to cast it in terms both of the vocational (as well as the musical), to see it as both calling to us and, potentially, as our calling. If, that is, we have ears to hear—ears sensitive to the register in which the call is sung—and voice with which to respond.

With such figures of speech and writing, Cavell grants perfectionism a privileged place in moral discourse; while we might choose whether to commit to a moral doctrine, the perfectionist challenge (a call is also a call or demand for our attention) seems to be there whether we like it or not. But part of Cavell's point, I take it, is not to introduce perfectionism as a moral theory to supersede all others, but to name a basic moral condition and impulse that risks being overlooked because it is always in plain sight. True, Cavell situates perfectionism as prior to moral doctrine, but necessarily so; the drive to form any sort of moral doctrine, theory, or system must originate as a response to the twinned moods of dissatisfaction and desire, an answer to the call of perfectionism which makes itself heard as a "moment … in which a crisis forces an examination of one's life that calls for a transformation or reorienting of it" (Cavell, 2015, p. 11). We devise and/or commit to moral theories because we desire things—ourselves, the world—to be other than they are. But perfectionism, we are told, also "intervenes" in any statement of or adherence to moral doctrine: it is thus Cavell's name for those moments of rupture, whereby we interrogate the moral norms by which we find ourselves bound, and which we find ourselves challenged to justify, repudiate, or revise.

Cavell's moral perfectionism, then, is concerned with the continuously transitional and the transformational, and it is here that moral perfectionism takes on its poetical shape and its specifically Emersonian flavour, this latter a non-teleological element that is a bulwark against solipsism, crude selfishness, and despair—what Cavell calls "debased perfectionism" (2015, p. 18):[5] "Emersonian perfectionism ... specifically sets itself against any idea of ultimate perfection" (p. 3). Philosophy's moral calling is thus to be viewed as a non-pessimistic project without end; we can always be other (the hope is "better," though what this means is no easy question) than we are, and may find that we are now other than we were.

Cavell is interested in the ways in which linguistic-poetic negotiation of the apparently familiar can result in genuine knowledge, for in rethinking the supposedly already-known we reconstitute it; in defamiliarizing it, we come better to understand it. Here, Cavell's Emersonian and Wittgensteinian influences converge. Emerson's "language is ... in continuous struggle with itself," for he puts the vocabularies of philosophy in question "by testing whether they hold up under the pressure of ordinary speech." If Emerson demands that philosophy measure up to the everyday, Wittgenstein's challenge for philosophy is to reveal the everyday's significance, and Cavell quotes the following passage from the Investigations with approval: "[W]e do not seek to learn anything

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[5] Cavell is aware that moral perfectionism is susceptible to debasement, but this is true of all philosophy, religion, and other systems of belief (see Cavell, 2015, pp. 11–12, 18, 26).

new by [our investigation]. We want to understand something that is already in plain view. For this is what we seem in some sense not to understand" (Cavell, 2015, p. 15; Wittgenstein, 2009, §89). The welcome irony, as I see it for Cavell, is that to understand something that once we did not—most likely because we took it for granted, lived quite at home with it—is, of course, to usher in a sort of newness; it is to see things anew, as if for the first time, and thus to remake our relationship to them.[6]

This revivification and elevation of the apparently familiar or ordinary is an answer to the demand Cavell finds in moral philosophy for intelligibility. With his eye very much on the commonplace, Cavell "assum[es] that we can all recognize such moments in our lives" as when we are "asked to settle too soon for the world as it is" (Cavell, 2005, p. 23). Cavell describes "a sense of obscurity, to yourself as well as to others"; a feeling of "perplexity in relating yourself to what you find unacceptable in your world, without knowing what you can be held responsible for"; of finding oneself without an answer to the question, "Where do I stand?" (p. 23) In such moments, says Cavell, we find ourselves "wanting (that is, lacking and desiring) justification" (p. 24), unable to make ourselves intelligible. All moral theories worthy of the name are compelled to answer the demand of intelligibility, in whatever manner or style, and perfectionism "proposes confrontation and conversation as the means to determining whether we can live together, accept one another into the aspirations of our lives" (p. 24). Aware that he might be accused of overburdening dialogue with a moral role it cannot fulfil, Cavell offers a relatively modest suggestion: Other moral theories do meet the perfectionist demand of intelligibility by putting into words what is believed and claimed and why. But perfectionism's emphasis on conversation and confrontation keeps open the possibility that even the nature of disagreement—between this and that theory, this and that interlocutor—might also, at the very least, be made intelligible. Perfectionism might, then, be viewed as a simultaneously diagnostic and therapeutic stance in moral discourse.

Part of Cavell's relevance to educational philosophy is his identification of the motivating dynamic of dissatisfaction and desire. I take it for granted that what he diagnoses is as familiar as he believes it to be; moreover, that the school is bound up in students' experience of dissatisfaction and desire. Schooling may often be a source of dissatisfaction, but it may also be a site on which intelligibility emerges, and thus begins to answer to desire. To make oneself intelligible by renegotiating some aspect of the world in poetic fashion is to see moral deliberation as discursive and compositional (more on this in section 5). To increase one's compositional abilities, then, is to improve one's capacity for (intelligible) moral deliberation, for increasingly refined articulations of one's sense of self, one's shifting web of moral beliefs, and one's beliefs about those beliefs.[7] Since the linguistic turn, there is nothing new in arguing that moral language is not "merely" descriptive of, because derived from, moral action. But a lesson we might learn from Cavell, I think, is that we needn't concern ourselves with jealous arguments over the moral primacy of either language or action; what is crucial is that this or that act only shows up as moral or otherwise set in, against, or alongside some discursive frame. So, although Cavell's focal argument is not the dissolution of the theory/practice binary, his work is a solvent for it. Before one can make one's moral commitments intelligible—to one's self and others—one needs some degree of linguistic-compositional competence, and it is on this front that English studies and creative writing practices might play a role.

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[6] This mode or register of new knowledge is dramatized in Ford's 2009 film adaptation of Isherwood's *A Single Man* (1964/2010): On his last day of life, George experiences what before was mute routine as a succession of revelations, each one presenting itself as a moment of sensory rupture or interruption.

[7] Readers may detect an echo of MacIntyre's comments on morality and narrativity (1985, p. 204–225). Brandom (1994; 2000) is also an influence.

3. Knowledge and Knowing; Learning and Unlearning

There is a troubling instrumentalization of literary texts in England's English studies curriculum. Because secondary English is geared heavily towards "comprehension," the texts against which student "knowledge" is tested are treated as objects that are thought to encase the author's "message" ("the meaning of the text").[8] To understand a text becomes a matter of "knowing what it means" or "stands for," in the crudely and trivially metaphorical fashion of "in saying S, the writer means M." On this model, the text is the vehicle of the author's meaning, and essay writing is in danger of being viewed as little more than a vehicle of comprehension, a record of facts known and recited. In testing comprehension almost exclusively, teaching English stands to perpetuate what Rancière calls "the inequality of intelligence" (2011, p. 11), in which picture, as far as English-as-comprehension goes, the (true) content of a literary text can be easily transmitted to those lacking knowledge of it.

I should make it clear at this point that I am not pressing an argument against the writing of literary criticism in English studies. What I am attempting to describe is the means by which the art of literary criticism—a tradition of creative and imaginative composition in which both critical and criticized texts emerge anew—has been supplanted by the essay-as-record-of-comprehension. The essay is less and less thought as a writerly form; the current and well-entrenched assumption that English is, in essence, textual comprehension has led to a loss of contact with our language—as it was, is, and might be spoken—and alongside that a subsequent loss of contact with the mythopoetic character of everyday life and its practices.[9] What is vital in English studies can be learned and known most intimately through writing practices, which might lead us towards re-establishing these lost contacts. We should, I contend, think of English on the model of the arts, but the arts critically and cautiously limned.

One reason why secondary English might not be considered an arts-practical subject, or why it might not be obvious to think it as such, is its status and categorization as a "core" subject. So categorized, it might seem to sit outside of other designations—arts, humanities, modern foreign languages, and so on. John Baldacchino rightly criticizes thinking that conceives of certain subject areas as "enabling" others; as subjects, that is, that reinforce, in subtle ways and by dint of their apparent accessibility and ease, the skillsets required by "core" subjects.[10] Baldacchino is dissatisfied with any conception of arts education that sees the arts in terms of forms of knowledge ready to be taught and learnt on a model of transmission and reception of facts; he rejects the notion that an artwork is designed to teach a lesson or moral, that it has a moral or instructional content waiting to be found (2013a, pp. 418–425). What Baldacchino (2013b) does not do—which I find curious—is bring English into the purview of the arts once he has exposed the problems with enablist thinking. This is an issue, firstly, because so much of what Baldacchino has to say about the arts, but with visual art as his paradigm, holds true for the practice of English studies and what in my view is most vital in and to them; and, secondly, because despite his powerful critique, Baldacchino (2013b) doesn't quite dismantle enablist logic. For him, the arts should not be seen as enabling "core" subjects, but there is no sense that so-called "core" subjects might be rethought as dwelling among the arts or other broader, interrelated subject-areas: the notion of the "core" subject remains. Unfortunate, this, because a good reason for not seeing arts subjects as enabling English is that

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[8] Hirsch work in hermeutics (1965) and cultural literacy (1983) exemplifies this attitude.
[9] For example, de Certeau (2011) and Heidegger (1975).
[10] Baldacchino (2013a, 2013b). For a critique of the very idea of a "core" curriculum, see White (2007).

English is itself an arts subject, which entails the sort of experimental learning and expansion of one's horizons that Baldacchino is interested in as an aesthetic and ethical project, and in which learners' capacities to improvise their ways through the world are increased and enriched. The basic character of this orientation—which has found philosophical expression in many and varied ways[11]—is an attention to our encounters with the contingent and symbolic nature of our cultural and acculturated lives, or what Baldacchino calls "the circumstantial and contingent conditions of the world" (2013a, p. 421).

It is such an orientation that Baldacchino has in mind when he presses the case for "unlearning," in which we encounter some aspect of the always-already familiarity of quotidian being, in such a way that it is remade or reconfigured. Unlearning is not an educational method, but a critical orientation towards the situated contingency of day-to-day experience. (Baldacchino's and Cavell's points of reference are very different, but here, I hope, the reader will hear a perfectionist echo). The playfulness of the term—for "unlearning" is neither "not-learning" nor "anti-learning"—is due to Baldacchino's attempt to hold in productive tension the known and as yet un-experienced, a point he exemplifies by reference to Richard Serra's Sequence (2006/2007), a sculpture series consisting of huge curved metal sheets (Baldacchino, 2013a, p. 423). To view these pieces, spectators must walk through—and thus enter and inhabit—the artwork. The experience, claims Baldacchino, is disorienting; but, in the relative safety of the exhibition space, one is moved to ponder, to self-consciously experience, the nature of the disorienting experience itself. Though spectators share and inhabit a common space, there is no common "content" to be known or revealed, as the "meaning" of the work is disclosed only in spectators' involvements; "here," writes Baldacchino, "the act of spectating is volatile and open because no one is likely to inhabit this labyrinthine space in identical ways" (p. 423). Feeling disoriented, a little lost, is likely to be familiar; so familiar, indeed, that we are unlikely to think much about it when or as we experience it (beyond trying to re-orient ourselves). But in Serra's pieces, thinks Baldacchino, one is invited to rethink—or "unlearn"—what one (thinks one) knows of disorientation.

On Baldacchino's Adornian model, "the tension between art and education" emerges from art's resistance to the sort of codification that formal education would seem to demand, if knowledge is to be thought only or even primarily in terms of transmission and reception of information (Baldacchino, 2013a, p. 417), and if what it is to "know" a work of art is to "comprehend" it. There is, then, a muted polemic in "unlearning," which is contrasted to the view in which the relationship of "knowledge" to "learning" is one, on the side of the learner, only of receptivity—a view in which knowledge is something (facts?) the learner takes in and assimilates. But "unlearning" is conceptual shorthand for neither problem-solving nor "learning by experience." In tasks where students are presented with something designed to puzzle or confuse, there is still, more often than not, a determinate content to be known or comprehended; the puzzle is meant to be solved, and is designed working back from the solution. And Baldacchino has something other than this in mind. As for "learning by experience," it is not clear what "non-experiential learning" might mean, nor how it might be theorized. Often, "experiential learning" is used to mean "learning by doing," where "doing" refers to something like, for example, making a scale-model of a bridge rather than, or alongside, being explicitly taught, told, or instructed as to what a bridge is, how it is built, and so on. But just as is "learning by doing," learning through explicit instruction is surely experiential: being taught or instructed must surely take hold in and therefore as experience.

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[11] For example, Heidegger's ontology of the artwork (1975); Deleuze and Guattari's suggestion that art furnishes us with new percepts (1994); Rorty's insistence on the transformative capacity of language (1989). For recent Heideggerian interventions in philosophy of education, see Trubody (2015) and Williams (2015).

"Practical experience," then, is not the distinguishing mark of "unlearning," not only because, as I have suggested, the theory–practice binary ultimately breaks down, but also because experience is written into the very possibility of learning anything at all. Were practical experience the special mark of "unlearning," there would be little point in teaching any artistic practices in schools. For where a history of the supposedly "best that has been thought and said"[12] seems to lend itself easily enough to being taught and learned on the transmission–reception model of knowledge-as-facts, artistic ability on this same model can be dismissed as something unteachable, something simply internal to or lacking in a person by accident of their "natural" endowment. Perhaps counter-intuitively, unlearning, as I read Bladacchino, preserves a space in formal schooling for the teaching and learning of art. It marks a space in which arts practices might be seen as sites of genuine knowledge, rather than sites of skills-development (either the so-called "practical skills" to which knowledge is generally opposed, or the "fundamental skills" imagined by enablist thinking), by being learned through practice, demonstration, development; through the experience of producing as well as "reading" artworks.

When Baldacchino writes of artistic "processes," he writes of the interaction between artist and artwork, artwork and spectator, and it is at such points that one can hear the echo of existential phenomenology as well as perfectionism. Consider the following, for example, the italicized portion of which is about as close as Baldacchino comes to a succinct definition of unlearning:[13] "Artworks have no lessons to give because their stories are not descriptions, but *moments of reality that come by in the processes by which subjectivity is externalised and everyday life is continuously re-invented*" (2013a, p. 426, emphasis added). The claim that "reality" is "in" the reconstructive encounter with art clearly has a phenomenological accent, which can be traced to the likes of Robert Pippin and Charles Taylor, among others. Pippin has explained basic human rationality as being "'in' action, not 'behind' action" (2013, p. 93), a sentiment which mirrors Taylor's claim that "understanding and know-how [...] [are] not 'within' me," but, rather, "in the interaction" itself (2005, p. 38). In such accounts, significance emerges in our worldly interactions themselves, not from "behind" the forms of the objects—artistic or otherwise—that we encounter in the world. Like these phenomenologists, Baldacchino (2013a, p. 421 & passim) is interested in the ways in which our basic intentionality towards the world[14] can be interrupted and, as a result, quotidian experience emerges afresh, is remade or reinvented. Though he never states his case in such terms, Baldacchino's argument for unlearning can be made in the dialect of phenomenology, but I continue to use Baldacchino's term to keep in view the parallels between fine arts education and English studies.

It should not go unnoticed that in Baldacchino, as exemplified by his reading of Serra, the artist is the author of the work but not of its meaning; he cannot be author of the latter, because the artwork, for Baldacchino, has no determinate content. The asymmetry between the artist and the spectator, then, lies not in the artist having some access to the truth of the meaning "behind" the

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[12] Thus Michael Gove (2009)—addressing the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce in his role as Shadow Secretary of State for Education—invoked the spirit of Arnold when outlining what all students should experience at school.

[13] He echoes this sentence in later passages (e.g., pp. 424, 425).

[14] Baldacchino's brief comments on intentionality are taken from Searle (2013, pp. 423–424)—not a phenomenologist, per se, but his work responds to that tradition and engages with it. See, for example, Searle (1983, 1999) and Dreyfus (2014, chs. 3 & 7). Dreyfus's notion of fluid coping is developed from his readings of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, and is concerned with the ways in which our most basic modes of being— say, our ability to navigate our way successfully around the furniture of an unfamiliar room—is structurally and, perhaps, existentially similar to our "higher-order" capabilities, such as expert tennis-playing or musical performance.

artwork. There remains an involvement in composition—a process that would have its own phenomenological significances—that is, we might say, the artist's and not the spectator's, but Baldacchino's view of arts education, like the phenomenological view generally, presupposes an equality of intelligence between all comers as far as the "meaning" of a completed work goes.

How, then, is this to be applied to English studies? Of course, it is possible for readers to misunderstand words, sentences, entire paragraphs. But when we speak about the meaning of this or that word or sentence, we are not speaking in the literary-critical mode of "the meaning of the text." When the taking of a word, W, as meaning this is corrected so that it is taken instead to mean that, we are resetting in some historical context the conventional use of the word ("W tended/tends to be used in the sense of..."). The effects of such correction may be to alter the reader's experience of a text, but to comprehend conventional use of this or that lexeme is not to have unearthed "the meaning" of the literary work; that emerges in the interaction itself between reader and text. What I am describing is, I think, a familiar phenomenon, though the terms I am using may mask that fact; it is exemplified by the simultaneous and shifting successes and failures of a single work in emerging as significant to the students of one class.

In his recent work, Baldacchino has proposed a shift from forms of knowledge to forms of knowing, with visual arts as a paradigm case. I would suggest, and he would seem to agree with this,[15] that an even stronger statement of this shift of attention is not only from knowledge to knowing, but also from form to mode, an important revision if one wants—as I do—to understand arts practices not as mediums to knowledge, but as modes constitutive of knowing itself. Here, I use "mode" and "knowing" to indicate the productive, compositional side of knowledge. For those "bodies of knowledge" that we must come to know are also so many objects, or products, of expression; knowledge of them cannot be shown apart from some mode of expression, or some type of expressive act. We educators simultaneously take this for granted while losing sight of it, whenever we take tests and assessments as "evidence" of what students know, and when we make claims (that echo Polanyi, 2009) about so-and-so knowing more than she can put on the page. It is not my suggestion that "forms of knowledge" or "bodies of knowledge" play no part in education (nor that there is no outside or external world which we might come objectively to know). It is my suggestion that coming to know the external, objective world is a productive as well as receptive process; that the productive side is often discounted from educational discussions around "knowledge," the "teaching of knowledge," and of so-called "knowledge bases" (on this, see Christodoulou, 2014); and that this discounting is correlative to the privileging of appreciation-as--comprehension over and above appreciation-as-production. I have lingered on Baldacchino's "unlearning" because it encapsulates a view of arts-educational practice which understands knowledge in productive as well as receptive terms, and because, as mentioned, it is part of a model of fine arts education that has much to offer English studies and the ways in which English as a site of knowledge and knowing might better be conceived.

4. Doing English

As we near this paper's end, it remains for me to sketch in bolder lines the ways in which English, with creative writing as its primary practice, fits with the process of unlearning. Let's begin with the essay. There are at least two close-knit problems with essay writing as it is often tasked to secondary English students: what the essay is thought to be and do. Too often, the essay is not approached as

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[15] This claim is based on discussion (PESGB seminar, Institute of Education, 2014) and private correspondence with Baldacchino.

a form, per se, but a type of writing the form of which is a by-product of its function (testing students' literary "knowledge"). What we supposedly "do" when we "do" literary criticism is, then, grasped easily enough when thought of as a set of procedures carried out on and after a text (that is, when literary criticism is thought as something we do to a text after reading it). This procedural approach to "doing" English literature is particularly easy to discern at the secondary level, where close reading is still very much at the centre of things, when it is predominantly, though not exclusively, reading that is assessed, and when the twinned demands of increasingly rigid assessment criteria and performance benchmarks encourage procedural and formulaic approaches to writing and its teaching (in order to "access" this assessment objective, do x; to "access" that objective, do y).

Literary criticism at the secondary level is seldom understood as a mode of creative self-expression, a mode of knowing, and this I consider a serious flaw in our approach to literature studies (at, I suspect, almost all levels of formal education). There is, I wish to suggest, an important difference between understanding what it is to know in terms of forms of knowledge and modes of knowing. If we begin to think of knowledge as being modal—or, rather, as being modally constituted and expressed—then it is not a big step to think of the production of artworks as being a knowledgeable act, an act in which knowledge is expressed and constituted. Literary criticism re-thought as a creative genre or mode enacts Rancière's idea of the emancipated spectator (a figure very much in tune with Baldacchino), who is no longer understood as a passive consumer of the artwork, both subject to and object of the authority of artist and artwork (Rancière, 2011). Literary criticism is revealed as a mode by which the artwork is reconstituted, rewritten in the act of criticism, which, as itself a creative act, also positions the critic as creative agent. From this perspective, the sort of attentive, "critical" reading practices that literary criticism fosters should be thought not in terms of receptivity only, but as productive acts constituted as such in the very act of composition.

While unlearning involves a rejection of systematicity and methodological adherence, Baldacchino is not against what we might call "technique" and "discipline":[16] in order to unlearn, it may be necessary for the visual artist to improve her capacity with line, perspective, or with her handling of negative space. For the writer, how to render linguistically the scene, the sensory experience, emotion, a sense of movement, space and time, the building of a coherent and convincing argument: all will be a matter of technical refinement and disciplined practice though not necessarily of set methodological or methodical procedures. A good image of unlearning, illustrative of the difference between technique/discipline and systematicity/methodology, is the jazz musician: the apparent spontaneity that we hear in improvised music is a result of the jazz musician's spending so much time refining, improving, enlarging her grasp of what we might call musical "grammar." So the model I am proposing for English studies is that writing practices are understood as creative arts practices, because writing is—in a basic, if in certain contexts bland, sense—constitutionally creative. Reading and writing are mutually supportive and intertwined practices; two productive faces, if you like, of the same arts-practical coin. But, as I will discuss in section 5, where critical reading is a form of (re-)writing, one needs some compositional competence in order to make the nature of one's reading experience intelligible.

The shift I am suggesting for English studies is, potentially, highly technical: it would involve developing facility with the mechanics of language as we speak, have spoken, and might come to speak it, and thus going some way to re-establishing the lost contacts mentioned above. Understanding writers and their-and-our language would at times involve copying, imitation,

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[16] This was also discussed at the PESGB seminar with Baldacchino.

perhaps even, in certain situations, pastiche—practices familiar to jazz education, for example, where transcription, analysis, and playing of other musicians' solos are common practice. Making writing practices central to what it is to do English would still involve encounters with a range of writers and writings, but it would encourage perspectival and attitudinal changes, whereby teachers and students alike are encouraged to resituate themselves as active, critical writer-readers. Literary criticism—an attenuated version of which is currently the paradigmatic mode of doing English in school, and is commonly confused with somehow being English—would not be jettisoned. But one would study literary criticism as a practice, a self-expressive mode among others, rather than experience it as the unfortunate but necessary by-product of having to demonstrate one's comprehension of the meaning of a text. It is the curious fate of English as a "core" secondary subject to have been hived off from its various discursive-creative modes; it is easy to see that one demonstrates "understanding" of painting-as-practice by painting, of art history by writing art history, of musical performance by performing musically, of musicology by musicological discourse. Secondary English in its current form barely recognizes such equivalent modes of practice: it is a study of writing which denigrates the very art and craft on which it is founded.

5. Conclusion

Perhaps it is fairer or more accurate to say that, in England, English is in danger of becoming a subject that, at institutional and policy levels, denigrates the very craft and works on which it is founded, and of which its paradigmatic mode—literary criticism—is properly a part. Defence on moral grounds of the arts in education is not new, and while the conclusions of this article do not dismiss contributions of the sort made by John Dewey, Maxine Greene, and Martha Nussbaum, I take a slightly different turn by emphasizing the moral-educational importance of composition; of what I call compositional or poetical experience. Poetical experience is at risk of being largely written out of English curricula, both explicitly—witness the removal of the level 3 Creative Writing qualification and creative writing options embedded in level 3 literature syllabi in England (see Assessment and Qualifications Alliance, 2013a, 2013b; Edexcel, 2016)—and de facto, by being either squeezed out or simply forgotten due to the considerable time pressures on merely "getting through" courses in time for terminal exams.

Dewey, Greene, and Nussbaum have a shared belief in the moral importance of literature and the arts to education. Their articulations of the arts, morality, and education turn on "appreciation," though this term signifies differently in each philosopher. For Dewey, appreciation refers to the assimilation of aesthetic (to do with the affective inner life) and artistic (to do with aesthetic life given concrete form as art objects) sensibility to personal experience, a process which leads to experience in a richer sense.[17] The importance of appreciation lies, for Nussbaum, in its expansion of our capacity for flights of imaginative sympathy: in our encounters with literature, we are asked to view this or that situation through the eyes of an other (often, a character positioned as one of society's Others or subalterns, in the sense posited by Spivak, 1988). For Greene (2001, p. 53–54), appreciation of works of art requires a particular style or mode of attention, in which one opens oneself to the work much as one would to an interlocutor. Such meanings as artworks have are constituted not "in" the works themselves (once again, meaning does not lie dormant in or behind the facade of the work, waiting to exhumed), but in the encounter between person and work; the

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[17] See Dewey (1916/1997), especially chapters 15 and 18.

significance of a work of art cannot but be refracted through the unique prism of the person regarding it.

In Greene and Dewey especially, understanding the significance of a work of art is a creative process: meanings are made through the act of engagement, in the communicative space between reader and text.[18] For them and Nussbaum, the implications of aesthetic-artistic education are distinctly moral: we stand to expand our social-sympathetic horizons as a result of aesthetic appreciation. Such accounts are not to be dismissed, but while they take the creative-constitutive role of the reader-spectator for granted, little thought is given on the side of the compositional or poetical. Nussbaum believes it necessary to cultivate what she calls the "narrative imagination"— "the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself"— and that the "cultivation of sympathy has been a keen part of the best modern ideas of democratic education" (2010, p. 95). But she does not consider how much more challenging it might be, but also how much closer one might be brought to other and othered positions, were one to compose such situations oneself.

This is not to say that it is somehow "better" morally to compose a piece of fiction than a critical essay. Each genre exerts different pressures on the writer. When writing about the moral implications of literature, Nussbaum tends to limit her examples to works that are easily read—let us leave aside Baldacchino's likely rejoinder—as having moral lessons to teach. Imagine, then, that one were writing a "creative" piece that echoed the climactic trial section of Wright's *Native Son* (1940). Here, one would be challenged by the demands of both mimesis and expression; that is, by both the need to render the richly varied tonal qualities of the scene—a moral encounter between persons—and the need to give voice to those persons, to make intelligible their points of view, trains of thought (logical or otherwise), the weft and warp of their moral lives. The writer here has to attempt to speak from a variety of subject positions and perspectives.[19] She will also have to decide how to attempt to position the reader with respect to the text. The writer cannot, of course, guarantee that the reader will take up that position, but in addressing this issue, the writer makes fundamental decisions about narratorial diction and distance. Here—in a mirrored reversal of Dewey's and Greene's reader-as-writer dynamics—the writer, in writing, is also a reader, negotiating her relationship with both her text and imagined reader. (The writer's attempt to position the reader will reach the reader as an ethical challenge: How should I position myself, for example, with respect to the intradiegetic narrative tissue in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, given not only the colonial history with which it is articulated, but also the text's freighted critical history?[20]) To the extent that writers such as Dewey, Greene, and Nussbaum assume that the dynamic between the reader-as-writer and the text has moral implications, so too must that between writer-as-reader and text.

In the case of the critical essay, the writer negotiates his relationship to the work of art much as Greene characterizes it, by "encountering the work much in the way you encounter other persons": by being "open to them, to be ready to see new dimensions, new facets of the other, to recognize

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[18] A similar dynamic is also explored by Rancière (2011).

[19] Further ethical and moral questions arise from this challenge concerning the ethics of speaking-as or -for an other. Speaking-*for* might suggest that the imagined other for whom one speaks remains consigned to voicelessness. Speaking-*as* is open to accusations that one assumes understanding of an other's plight simply through an act of so-called "imagination" or imitation. Some writers and texts, aware of such difficulty, dramatize this ethical dilemma itself. Two such examples: Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) (through which echoes the refrain "unspeakable thoughts unspoken"), particularly the passages appearing to deal with bearing witness to the Middle Passage; and Coetzee's presentation of the Friday figure in *Foe* (1987).

[20] A sense of this difficult negotiation attendant can be gained from the Norton Critical edition of Conrad's novella (1899/2005).

the possibility of some fresh perception or understanding" (2001, p. 54). What needs to be added to this is that, if we are to avoid a crude and reductive romanticism which assumes that expression simply follows "naturally" from the revelatory encounter with the artwork, then the attempt to put the Greenian encounter into words, the moral demand for intelligibility identified by Cavell, is a process every bit as compositional as that which goes into producing artworks. As I read Greene, the educative moment or rupture consists in the encounter with the artwork; learning how to open oneself to aesthetic encounter is itself an education, which arrives as a truly educative moment. In attempting to put things into words, we make such encounters intelligible—to ourselves and others. We often think of sentences as containing their messages, but just as aesthetic appreciation arrives as a moment, so too does intelligibility (recall Cavell's characterization): we may not feel we have got our words "right" in our writing, but something may become intelligible in the very attempt at expression. Without such compositional or poetical intelligibility, the encounters of which Dewey, Nussbaum, Greene, and others write are less fully realized. Not least, the capacity to unlearn—to argue, critique, debate, speculate—stands only to be expanded and enriched if we approach literary criticism and essay writing as available modes of self-knowing among other such writerly modes, and not as a means to some other end (i.e. of demonstrating comprehension of the meaning of the text).

When Cavell writes about Emerson, Thoreau, Wittgenstein, and others, he does not try to "explain" them textbook fashion. He works and writes through them; he learns and offers something about himself in the act of making intelligible what these writers and their works say to or for him, as if their words are, to paraphrase Whitman (1855/2003, verse l.10), for his mouth forever. His work is truly educative—in the obvious sense that, yes, we might stand to learn something from reading Cavell, but also in the sense that his writing is an educative act or experience, an essay in intelligibility (in which light we might remind ourselves that essay names not only a genre of writing, but, also acts of attempt).

The moral-educational importance of creative writing lies not in its being used as a means for the demonstration and gauging of receptivity of some moral "message" or "rulebook," but in its potential to expand persons' capacities for moral deliberation and debate; to change their orientation in and to the world; in short, to allow them to enter into deliberation about which moral rulebooks might best be followed and why, and to have a hand in composing, reconfiguring, and rationalizing their moral rulebooks. Creative writing—which includes critical and academic writing, but is, in general, distinct from writing which functions as a placeholder for vocal responses (for example, shopping lists and questionnaires)—demands that one encounter anew, renegotiate, one's relationship with the language one has taken for granted; it asks that one put oneself into a deliberative relationship with that language, and thereby remake both it and one's relationship to it. Such an encountering—such a process of unlearning—is standard practice in creative writing education, where writers are asked to engage with work from the perspectives of writer-producers, and reader-producers of their own and others' works.[21] This latter perspective may be adopted in different forms: sometimes pieces are "workshopped," and sometimes critical reflections on one's own and/or others' works are produced, leading to another original composition, a paratext that cannot but re-shape the "original" work, and which makes visible, explicit, the idea of the writer-as-reader. This I see as basically moral, in that the sorts of negotiations that go on in the writing–reading continuum answer to moral perfectionism's call on at least two fronts. First, they answer the demand for intelligibility, this in the manner of confrontation and conversation particular to

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[21] See, for example, the specification for the short-lived A Level in Creative Writing (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance, 2013b), Royal Holloway's course brochure for its BA in Creative Writing and English (n.d.), and the "Writing Journeys" of the National Writing Project (n.d).

Cavell's perfectionism. Indeed, "confrontation and conversation" rather neatly sums up the rationale of the critical-reflective piece that is so common to creative writing pedagogy. Second, our literary encounters as writer-readers may—there can be no guarantees—be transformative in the moral perfectionist sense of something being made poetically intelligible. There is no sense in which English is of necessity the only subject-area in which such experiences as I have outlined might be undertaken and undergone, but I am not arguing for the dissolution of subject-areas and -expertise. My proposal is simply that English has an important contribution to make to moral education, and that this contribution is greatly hampered when the job of secondary English studies—in England at least—is thought primarily to be teaching "comprehension" of texts, while writerly encounters with texts are written out of the reading experience.

In Symposium, Plato reminds us that the name poet, although used most commonly to identify writers of musical verse, is properly applied to any maker of any sort of artworks (p. 28), for poiesis is, of course, making. Late in the dialogue, Alcibiades accuses Socrates of "cloth[ing] himself in language" (p. 42), a charge resonant with what is often taken (erroneously, in Cavell's view) as the typically Platonic distrust of the poetical: poetry and rhetoric seen as veils, not vehicles, of truth. But perhaps Socrates does indeed clothe himself in language, if by that we mean his linguistic virtuosity allows him to present himself in the manner and style of his choosing, and enables him, in ironist fashion, to expose mere sophistry and rhetoric by donning its garb in order to cast it off. And of course, Plato's reminder of the wider reach of poiesis is itself a turn poetically cloaked, for it comes to us in the voice of Socrates, who is himself recalling the teachings of Diotima, the wise woman whose words marked a transformative moment, a moral-perfectionist nodal point, for Socrates.

In these closing passages, we have considered a richer sense of "appreciation," in the vein of Dewey and Greene, but from the side of the writer-reader rather than the reader-writer. Inasmuch as educative appreciation turns on the moment of rupture and transformation, we might think of education's aims as moral perfectionist aims. And to the extent that education and moral perfectionism privilege development, transformation, they take seriously—or, in the case of English studies in English secondary education, ought to take seriously—the role of poetical experience, and the practices fostered by creative writing. For such experiences and practices might alter how, why, and from where we see ourselves and our standing in relation to others and the world.

Acknowledgement

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