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Creative Writing Programmes and Patronage

(Final submitted draft)

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Abstract:

Creative Writing programmes in universities now offer both an education for and employment to literary writers. This paper asks how literary writers apprehend their relatively recently institutionalised position, as university staff and students. The concept of 'patronage', it is argued, offers a useful way into reflecting upon such academic institutionalisation. The argument is presented in three parts. The first outlines some of the conceptual nuances of patronage. The second examines the oft made claim that universities extend patronage to literary writers by enabling employment as Creative Writing staff. The third part engages with a question: what precisely does a student expect to gain from a Creative Writing programme and what does the degree validate? It is suggested that Creative Writing programmes are designed principally to offer supportive patronage, with a promise – but without guarantees – of entry into a financial patronage system. A brief conclusion considers the bearing of these arguments on Creative Writing as a school subject.

Keywords:

Literary writing, students, teachers, employment, university

Introduction

With the settling of Creative Writing (CW hereafter) programmes in universities, the education and livelihood of literary writers have seemingly converged within an institutionalised system. This is certainly so in the USA, UK and a number of other European countries, Australia and Canada, and increasingly further afield. Though of older provenance in the USA, such programmes have consolidated themselves predominantly after the 1970s with varying degrees of attachment to or independence from older academic departments (especially of literary studies). So the CW programme is still a relatively young area in universities, though well-settled. Unsurprisingly, a few grey areas remain in how those who consider themselves to be literary writers apprehend their institutionalised position. This paper examines one particular and oft reiterated way of understanding that position: as a matter of 'patronage', especially where the university is thought of as the patron and literary

writers as enjoying the university's patronage. The pertinence of patronage to the place of CW programmes in universities is examined here from two perspectives: that of literary writers employed as CW staff, and that of literary writers enrolled as CW students. Before that, a section with some initial observations on the concept of 'patronage' follows.

The concept

With regard to literature, and the arts generally, the noun 'patronage' is now commonly understood as defined in the Oxford English Dictionary (2019, sense 2a): 'The action of a patron in using money or influence to advance the interests of a person, cause, art, etc.' By this definition, a patron could be an individual (of affluence or standing) or collective (governmental or non-governmental body), and it appears that the patron's act is principally to advance the interests of art rather than her own interests. By way of patronage, money usually seems more germane than influence now. It is ordinarily thought of as providing financial means – a livelihood -- for writers so that they are freed to produce writings as best they can.

That's the most charitable understanding of what patronage consists in. More studied perspectives find complex connotations in the term. If 'patronage' is associated with any systematised arrangement, not to speak of institutional form, it is necessarily inflected by the term's career from ancient Roman Law: a relationship between elite *patronus* and commoner *libertus*, a particular instance of which was the slave-owner and his freed slave. Rules to protect the interests of both parties while maintaining their relative status appeared in private law, of which one set out mutual responsibilities in a spirit that is still not altogether lost. It was described thus by W.W. Buckland (1921, p.89): 'The patron was entitled to *obsequium*. This is not easily defined, but the duty of respectful conduct which it implies is expressed in a number of specific rules'. Patronage in Roman Law is irrelevant here, but the spirit of *obsequium* can be recognised in contemporary semi-formal norms of institutional loyalty: e.g. deference to 'line-management' and subordination to bureaucratic 'leaders'. Roman Law, much as laid out in Buckland's book, was Max Weber's (1978 [1922]) source for understanding the 'patron-client' relationship, which exemplified pre-modern relationships in jurisprudence alongside kinship and guild fraternity (p.675). Weber described the emergence of in-principle equal relationships in modern jurisprudence (following a principle of freedom of contract) as a departure from and in opposition to patron-client relationships. He thought of governance based on the older principles as operated by feudal lords and administrators,

and the later form as operationalised by a ‘rational administrative bureaucracy’ closely ‘aligned with capitalist interests’ (succinctly stated on p.259). Weber’s perspective seems to largely underpin principles of liberal democratic governance now, though strong moves to replace patronage practices with meritocratic processes have been countered often by persistent adherence to them (especially in the civil services). Relatedly, patronage is now widely considered a corruptive factor in capitalist organisation and market functioning, though it is nevertheless a normal and often explicit part of corporate organisation – so a normalised sort of corruption. At any rate, principled hostility to patronage is common among advocates of liberal democracies and capitalist economies. More recently, some scholars have sought to reconcile patronage with democratic functioning in principle too. That mainly involves laboriously redefining democracy as consisting in healthy competition between interest groups with hierarchical structures (in a theoretical vein, Hodder, 2015; ostensibly inferred from case studies, Grindle, 2012). This turn is consistent with the currently dominant neoliberal reasoning which glues state and corporate activity.

In a general way, the term ‘patronage’ now resonates in cultural circuits with the ideological baggage it carries. Cultural historians have largely understood patronage and the market as alternative financial regimes. These regimes have seldom excluded each other but the powerful historical dominance of patronage has gradually been overtaken by market systems (for a succinct account, see Shiner, 2001, pp.126-29). In such histories, then, patronage is considered the counterpoint for the market much as Weber thought of client-patron systems as the counterpoint for ‘rational administrative bureaucracy’. For cultural production, patronage is understood as based on patrons commissioning and supporting writers and artists, whereby they set conditions on what is produced – so artists and writers are limited in determining what they should produce. Market systems allow artists and writers freedom to produce what they wish, and then test their products’ worth in the market. It is often observed that such market ‘freedom’ is in fact chimerical because artists and writers are inevitably constrained by how the market is structured and what is likely to be consumable therein. With regard to patronage, it is relatedly observed that some patrons may well be genuinely disinterested and allow artists and writers more freedom than the market system. So both regimes impose limits on writers’ self-determination, and the jury is still out as to which – or what combination of both – is preferable as a regime.

Literary historians have examined patronage practices, or shifts away from patronage, for most of the standard European (English) periods: Renaissance (e.g. Lytle and Orgel eds., 1981; Brown ed., 1991), Early Modern (e.g. Korshin, 1974; Griffin, 1996), Victorian (here

mainly departure towards professionalization, e.g. Salmon, 2013), Modernist (the return of patronage coalescing with market processes, e.g. Rainey, 1998, Ch.5; Delaney, 1999). An in-principle hostility among literary scholars towards patronage has often been observed, which, again, derives from the Weberian approach. In his study of Early Modern English literary patronage, Dustin Griffin began by noting that historians tended to neglect the area because, since the 19th century, they have considered the patronage system ‘by definition oppressive and demeaning’ (Griffin, 1996, pp.1-2). The appearance of patronage amidst professionalised literary markets for the Modernists thus needed an explanation. Lawrence Rainey felt that it was an uncomfortable accommodation: ‘The extension of capitalist relations into every dimension of life meant that both writers and patrons were uneasy about an institution so clearly at odds with the work ethic, the meritocratic ethos that subtends market relations’ (Rainey, 2011, p.60). Paul Delaney found that this accommodation was possible because it worked in market terms and patrons nevertheless acted without being motivated by financial self-interest:

A patroness provided ‘venture capital’ for the development of works that were not yet viable in the commercial market; she did not give a reward [...], but made an investment, both in the artist’s future development and in the transformation of public taste. Her own profit, if it accrued, would be in literary prestige rather than money, as she gained a position of honour in the living pantheon of modernism. (Delaney, 1999, p.346)

Despite some in-principle doubts, artists and writers have been friendly to a regime of patronage while courting market success. The patronage of states (through institutions like Writers’ Unions in communist countries, Arts Councils in capitalist countries), and of charities, foundations and professional associations have often been regarded as both beneficial and necessary. In keeping with the neoliberal turn in conceiving patronage now, a relatively recent development has been of digital platforms -- like Patreon, In4Art, Kickstarter -- which enable artists and writers to make money by posting their products online and getting ‘patronage’ from followers, along a crowdfunding model (Miller, 2017; Hern, 2018; *Economist*, 2018). Like stretching the concept of democracy to gel with patronage in public service, this seems to stretch the concept of patronage towards thinking of consumers or sponsors as ‘patrons’. By doing so the platform providers no doubt make handsome profits as middlemen between artists and their audiences.

But this argument is confined to the context of universities, to which I now turn.

University CW staff

The idea that universities have extended ‘patronage’ for literary writers by establishing CW programmes and departmental spaces – by institutionalising CW – has proved a surprisingly persistent one. Its shakiness was apparent from the early days of contemplating CW in universities. The first significant historian of the institutionalisation of CW, D.G. Myers (1996) presented the idea in his Introduction thus:

Yet this description raises a question, How was *teaching* hit upon as a form of patronage? It is an odd choice to say the least. [...] Mark Harris [1980] seems closer to the truth, though, when he points out the obvious: what the teaching of creative writing creates is *students*, not commissioned works of art. [...] Originally, then, teaching was the goal [in having CW in universities], not production and expansion. [...] Anyone who wants to teach creative writing must be recognized or licensed as a writer – through publication or earning the Master of Fine Arts – but no one must *teach* creative writing in order to *publish* creative writing. (Myers, 1996, pp.5-6)

Harris’s point, quoted by Myers, is in fact an older one; Myers might as well have referred to Allen Tate (1964), who accepted that ‘The English department and the university are now among our necessary patrons of literature’ (p.183), but felt that ‘the academically certified Creative Writer goes out to teach Creative Writing, and produces other Creative Writers who are not writers, but who produce still other Creative Writers who are not writers’ (p.184). Myers’s historical account was ultimately concerned with the market-driven separation of CW from critical literary studies, particularly since the 1970s, having originated with an integrative promise to open up new prospects *within* literary studies. This separation was prodded by universities as they came under corporate managements and measurement-driven accounting practices. So, CW found its increasingly autonomous space as an institutional discipline because its programmes recruited successfully, met funding and performance targets, and kept universities solvent. Beyond occasional short-term residencies (that could be old-fashioned patronage), universities made literary writers CW *employees*, like teachers and researchers for other academic disciplines, and not *clients* of the universities’ patronage (on consequent institutional contradictions, see Lim, 2003, and Gupta, 2017). Myers evidently suspected that the universities’ reputation as ‘patrons’ had something to do with his larger argument, but didn’t unpack it further. A few scholars taking a historicist approach to CW have since questioned the universities’ reputation as ‘patrons’. Michelene Wandor (2004) stated flatly that ‘the employment itself is not patronage’ (p.177), and less convincingly that

if there's any kind of writing that is putatively patronised (via leave, research support, etc.) it is academic research (pp.176-77). I return to this below. Paul Dawson (2004) was less sceptical: he felt that CW 'is more than a formal system of literary patronage and apprenticeship', and arose as a response to the 'perennial crisis in English' (p.205) – which still allows space for considering universities 'patrons'.

Generally, the idea has persisted despite Myers and Wandor and has occasionally been reinforced by reiteration. Sometimes the universities' 'patronage' of CW has appeared to be detrimental, leading to 'a mediocre literary culture and in intellectual dereliction for creative writing students and faculty' (as Lim, 2003, p.157, put it, and discussed debates around this view, pp.157-59), but it is 'patronage' nevertheless. More firmly, CW employees have sought to further their professional interests by pointing to the advantages for literary writers (themselves) that the universities' 'patronage' has offered. Alison Lurie (2004) mentioned the drudgery that such 'patronage' brings for CW staff, but also commented drily: 'But on the whole the present [patronage] system has more to recommend it. The campus writer does not come or go at the whim of his patron, but has a written contract or even life tenure' (p.90). The Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) of the USA presently states in its self-introductory history that: 'Academic programs have mustered hundreds of millions of dollars to support the study, making, and enjoyment of literature. The advent of creative writing programs has created the world's largest network of literary patronage' (AWP website). These sentences were by David Fenza, executive director of AWP 1995-2018, quoted approvingly (dated to 2007) by Mark McGurl (2009, p.24). The latter's book, also a historicist argument, contended that such 'patronage' has transformed literary production in the USA:

My thesis is not that creative writing programs preclude all other forms of literary patronage or venues for a career, but that these programs are the most original production of the postwar period, its most interesting and emblematic -- and, yes, increasingly hegemonic -- literary historical transformation. (p.31)

The idea of CW in universities being embedded through 'patronage' causes unease at times, but doesn't quite go away.

The persistence of the idea should not be blithely dismissed. It is obviously misconceived but is nevertheless indicative of a tension, precisely at that institutional fissure between literary studies and CW mentioned above. To some extent, its reiteration by literary writers employed in universities could be a performance of *obsequium*: somewhat insecure and relatively newly established employees flattering the employers, making them feel more

generous than self-interested. More importantly, the idea of the university's 'patronage' gestures towards the peculiar inside-outside position that CW has in academia. A distinction which bears upon both pedagogy and scholarship is material here. Knowledge that is produced and transmitted in literary studies, as in most older academic disciplines, is validated predominantly within academic circuits. That happens: with reference to established evidence-inference practices; by academic peer reviewing; by uptake in scholarly forums and publications; by following conventions of academic discourse; etc. The knowledge that is produced and transmitted in CW is validated predominantly from outside academic circuits: by institutions like publishers, agents and award-making bodies; by mass media notice; by the interest of broadly defined readers and consumers; etc. The two validation systems do not meet easily.

This had worried scholars sympathetic to the advent of university CW in the 1960s (e.g. Freedman, 1960; White, 1964), before market-led institutionalisation fully kicked in. Since the 1970s strenuous efforts have been made to make them meet, so that CW's validation system could appear meaningful in academic circuits. This has principally meant trying to construct a distinctive and academically resonant terminology, which could be bureaucratically grounded in statements of teaching aims and objectives, qualification benchmarks, quality assessments, appointments and promotions criteria. On the whole, despite being made to work for bureaucratic ends, they have not quite bridged the different expectations of the two validation systems. In relation to teaching, for instance, a phrase like 'reading as a writer' (or occasionally 'creative reading') for CW is not significantly different from reading 'authorial intentions' – or 'close reading' or 're-reading' -- in stylistic or narratological terms. For writing purposes, the phrase had its basis in composition courses, which had been offered at foundation level for all university students since the 18th century in the USA (for 1960s textbook usage, see Shaw, 1967). Literary writers have occasionally called upon it to give tips for aspiring writers (e.g. Warner, 1994; Oates, 2000). But it remains difficult to locate the distinctively *creative* aspect of 'reading as a writer' in CW pedagogic practice. Similarly, the phrase 'practice-based research' (or 'practice-led') is called upon to justify the production of fiction or poetry as CW *research* outputs and offered for academic assessments, notably for the CW PhD but also for career progression and departmental performance reviews. Academic doubts about the procedures for assessing such research, and whether it should be called 'research' in the academic sphere, are legion (on this when first formalised in the UK, see Candlin, 2000). In the 1980s, when the phrase 'practice-based research' emerged in relation to clinical practice, nursing, social work and

classroom pedagogy (research as doing something in an applied way), it was taken to mean that a practical process has *informed* the academic output, not that a non-academic output could *exemplify* practice and be regarded as research. The assessment of such literary outputs still seems best left to processes outside academia, where it is usually sought and conferred, without reference to academic processes. Going back to Wandor's (2008) argument that academic research enjoys university patronage: that isn't patronage because the university is charged with both enabling *and* validating the products of academic research for the public interest. The product emerges wholly from and is part of the *raison d'être* of the university system.

The literary writer's practice-based texts are understandably ambiguously placed in the university system. Literary writers are employed in universities in terms of production that is validated outside academic circuits, and are expected to continue producing on those terms. What they do as employees in universities does not bear directly upon such production, and nor are universities able to validate that production meaningfully. Hence the peculiar inside-outside position of university CW staff. For literary writers, characterising universities as 'patrons' is no more than a euphemistic acknowledgement of their immaterial encouragement.

University CW students

There might be another way in which the idea of 'patronage' is relevant to CW programmes in universities. Let me approach this argument from a tangent.

It is a foregone conclusion that students like engaging with CW programmes in universities, have enrolled in large numbers to do so and have enjoyed the experience. Such programmes are therefore profitable and universities have found them worth investing in. Nevertheless, as CW programmes proliferate and negotiate with sector-wide changes in higher education accounting, their prospects naturally seem more variable. For instance, Paul Munden's (2013) state-of-the-discipline report on CW for the UK Higher Education Authority outlined a variegated picture in terms of student recruitment (pp.14-15). Munden's report was however more an advocacy and publicity statement than strictly a report, produced by the director of the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE). So it registered justified and unabashed pride in the putative record of student retention: 'In view of the exceptional fit of Creative Writing with HE study, it is unsurprising that retention of students is very high. Drop-out of 5% (below the overall national average) is considered unusual, with

ill-health or finance issues contributing' (p.18). Irrespective of the variable fortunes of particular programmes, generally CW has been and remains popular with university students.

An infrequently traversed way of understanding CW university students' interest involves asking the question that a *Guardian* article posed: 'Is a creative writing degree worth the money?' (Mills, 2014). It seems a natural question to ask because students pay (more often, take loans of) significant amounts of money for such degrees: e.g. in England, home students may pay up to £10,000 annually, overseas students considerably more. The *Guardian* article gave indecisive answers. The clearest response was the one given by a couple of students: they said they *felt* encouraged and *felt* their writing improved – they have had, in brief, a satisfactory experience. There are some standard catchphrases to convey this experience, admirably captured in this passage written by a CW tutor:

To the majority of CW students, the immediate attractions of the subject are in personal development, self-knowledge and awareness, self-expression and the development of their language skills. A creative writing class is the one place in the curriculum where every student is an individual and valued for that. (Brayfield, 2009, p.185)

So, these describe a self-centred or self-improvement experience which is difficult to generalise, and that may well be sufficient to justify the cost. Student attitude surveys and satisfaction ratings conducted by universities and CW professional associations bolster this justification. However, to this extent doing a CW programme seems to be in the region of going for 'mindfulness' or yoga sessions or oratory and composition courses which are usually very much less expensive.

Most CW staff and students would agree, I think, that this is a disparaging way of justifying the cost; most disciplines in universities claim something more. One of the ways in which the value of a degree is now measured in bureaucratic circles is according to the opportunities for employment that having a degree open up, or 'employability' (the definitions that apply in Britain were given in Knight and Yorke, 2003, p.5, and Yorke, 2004, p.7). A considerable apparatus for instilling and measuring 'employability' has been erected amidst some scepticism (e.g. Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2004), mainly based on tracking employment taken up by graduates and surveying employers' expectations. The record in this respect for CW graduates is difficult to extricate because the data available usually crosses several broadly 'creative' disciplines including 'media and communications'. The upbeat view presented in Munden's (2013) report is both an assertion of success and ambiguous:

Though employment rates are cited as high, a Russell group university includes 'joblessness' as something for which its Creative Writing graduates are well prepared.

A temptingly amusing headline for the critics, the true implication is the important, high level of inner resourcefulness with which Creative Writing graduates are fortified: in learning to construct a variety of human narratives within their studies, they are perhaps better equipped than most in finding their own personal ways through even the most difficult of times. (Munden, 2013, p.10)

So CW students do get jobs and yet are well prepared not to (and prepared to do low-paid menial jobs, according to Webb, 2017, p.25). Much is made in this respect of ‘transferable skills’ – a phrase which emerged alongside ‘employability’ -- which can be brought to various employment sectors. A CW tutor in that *Guardian* report observed that programmes impart ‘critical and rhetorical skills to get a job in the creative industries, in education, editing, copywriting and so on’ (Mills, 2014). However, these are skills putatively obtained from any area of Humanities or Social Science study and their relationship to a university-level degree is questionable; various skills-focused and relatively inexpensive vocational courses could suffice for these. The question of the worth of a CW university degree, as for a degree in any academic area, does concern what the degree explicitly validates: it is formal recognition of ability in an area of advanced knowledge that is materially valued and therefore a license for undertaking some livelihood-generating activity. In this, a CW university degree suffers from a disadvantage compared to, for instance, a literary studies or history degree, due to the distinctive way in which accomplishment is validated – as noted above. Adequate ability in literary or historical analysis formally testified by a university degree is meaningful because validation of such ability is given from within academic circuits; adequate ability as a creative writer is not as meaningfully testified by a university degree because that ability can only be validated outside academic circuits. Beyond those transferable skills, the testament to ability and knowledge that may be materially productive is of comparatively doubtful credibility for CW degrees.

As a license, therefore, the CW degree is of limited import. It is accepted as such only, as various scholars from Tate (1964) onwards have said, for employment in teaching CW. As such, the CW degree is apt to be regarded less as materially productive for different spheres of employment and more as materially reproductive *within* universities. Logically enough, a CW degree can be disregarded where an employer (or publisher or production firm) looks for evidence of ability in writing creatively; evidence from outside academia serves better, i.e. from consumers, publication/performance record, non-academic authorities (practitioners). A degree in literary studies or history is however accepted as a reasonable validation of ability in those areas by employers who seek such abilities. In this sense, the

latter may more effectively be considered a license for employment than a CW degree outside teaching.

However, the considerations addressed thus far with regard to the costs and returns of CW degrees possibly miss the point of student interest. Ultimately CW students are probably predominantly driven neither by a desire for an uplifting experience and nor by a need for a livelihood licensed by the degree. The obvious driver is a desire to be recognised and acknowledged as a literary writer. With this in mind, the question about costs could be rephrased thus: what is the relationship of the costs of doing a CW degree to this aspiration? The usual answer is the one the *Guardian* article concluded with:

The reality is that publishing success may only come to a minority of creative writing graduates, but the most noted writers do often come from MA writing programmes. Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro and Nathan Filer, the latest Costa book prize winner, are just some examples. Maybe you don't need to do a degree or a master's to be a successful writer, but the training you'll get could help you on your way. (Mill, 2014)

This is not really a justification of the costs of the degree but of the process of engaging with the CW programme. It is moreover not a statistically underpinned justification. Statistically, the chances of being a published literary writer (a minimum bar of recognition) because of having engaged in a CW programme are largely intractable and probably low. Figures along those lines are seldom toted up, but if one considers the number of CW graduates every year at different levels and the number of those who do get their programme-period writings published, let's say, within five years to some notice, it won't be unreasonable to expect a small numerator and large denominator fraction. Instead of statistical accounting then, encouragement towards engaging with CW programmes is offered by naming established writers who are on record as having done such programmes. But that's a double edged argument: one could equally name a significant number of established writers who have not engaged with such a programme.

So, pointing to established writers with CW degrees is little more than a rhetorical gesture. Nevertheless, the value of CW programmes might be justified in terms of students' desire to be recognised literary writers. Let me consider the issue from another direction. In terms of literary production over, as a rule of thumb, the last century across the world, a great many literary writers have been recognised and become established without the benefits of formal CW programmes. One may ask: what part of their informal education and development towards recognition is being formalised in university CW programmes? That part, we may surmise, is what CW students are paying for. In trying to conceive that part,

literary writers' accounts of their own or others' development without going through CW programmes might be informative: we may look to various *Künstlerroman* and life-narratives (biographies and autobiographies). Similarly informative, it turns out, are the historical accounts of literary patronage cited above. A detailed argument referring these would naturally be a voluminous project; for the purposes of this paper, let me simply state the bald argument inspired loosely by a range of such accounts, more as a hypothesis rather than an inference.

Although it is now taken for granted that patrons are principally those who offer direct financial resources for literary writers to practice their art (through commissions, sponsorships, residencies, prizes, etc.), that is actually a rather narrow understanding of patronage. Let's call the patrons who offer direct funding as *financial patrons*. A patronage *system* however involves a number of parties who are not necessarily direct funders but who enable writers towards funders and livelihoods. In other words, there is a gap between the finished writing of a literary work and its being put before the public eye (recognised through publication or performance, reviews, awards, etc.). This gap is particularly pertinent for writers' first efforts, but remains pertinent so long as their subsequent efforts do not become sufficiently remunerative or unless the writer finds other means of livelihood while continuing to write. In this gap, writers have often depended upon an informal circuit of promoters, i.e. persons who may ensure preferment of their work to financial patrons and their patronage schemes. Such informal promoters are often germane in professionalised systems of literary production too: preferment is often needed to find a literary agent or publisher who, though not patrons, are essentially business investors in the literary product as a commodity -- so funders too. Such informal promoters may be sympathetic or influential friends and acquaintances, more experienced fellow travellers, like-minded persons in coeval ideological or cultural circuits, and so on. They perform their part partly by giving advice and intellectual companionship to writers and partly by supporting their preferment for financial patrons and investing professionals. The advice they give literary writers and the preferment they seek on their behalf are obviously linked; they offer a bridge across that gap. The history of literary patronage and writers' accounts of their careers suggest that such informal promoters have been and are seminal to both patronage and professional systems for literary production. For both systems, they should be and are regarded as patrons too. To distinguish them from *financial patrons*, let's call them *supportive patrons*. Ezra Pound is the famous example of a supportive patron for, among others, T.S. Eliot, as Eliot was, beyond being a publisher, for George Barker and others.

The informal part played by supportive patrons has depended upon social networks, interpersonal relations and forms of exchange which are difficult to formalise: friendship and acquaintance, experience and generosity, influence and regard, ideological and aesthetic affinity, conversations and sympathy. The downside of such informality is that supportive patronage has often promoted nepotism, elitism, vested interests, favouritism, undeserved preference and exclusion. The university CW programme could be thought of as an attempt to formalise and professionalise supportive patronage with a promise – but no more than a promise – of entry into financial patronage and professional investment-based systems for literary production. Correspondingly, the CW university teacher is in the position of a formal supportive patron, who would be paid for being so. As such, she serves a function for which her externally validated standing as a literary writer is important but which does not facilitate her own writing. CW teachers are thus required to exercise a kind of ‘authentic’ authority of being proven practitioners which has been difficult to reconcile with academic authority in universities. Students pay for CW programmes and degrees so as to have access to these supportive patrons, the CW teachers, and for the promise – but without guarantees – of facilitated guidance towards financial patronage and professional investment systems. The teaching methods of CW (workshops, peer commentary, self-reflection, etc.) often seek to maintain the informal intractability of supportive exchange within the formalised institution. This justifies the cost of the CW programme and degree; if students are willing to pay the cost, they must consider the support and promise worth it. The informal supportive patronage system obviously continues and continues to dominate alongside, with its promises and downside. Arguably, along with promising advantages, the formalised supportive patronage system that is CW in universities may well be nurturing its own downside – extending to literary writers the forms of elitism, undeserving preference, inequality and unequal access, nepotism, etc. that characterise the contemporary higher education market more broadly.

Conclusion: CW before the university?

The arguments of this paper concern the misconceived notion that patronage is extended to literary writers as teachers in CW programmes and the reasonable expectation that students have of finding supportive patronage through CW programmes. The concepts of patronage in question here have been grounded squarely in higher education institutions. However, CW has also found a tentative space as an independent subject at earlier levels of institutionalised

education, in schools. By way of a somewhat inconclusive conclusion, let me briefly consider what bearing the above observations may have on CW in schools.

On the face of it, the rationales for CW in schools have had little to do with concepts of patronage. Those rationales have variously been based on: the advantages CW may bring in literacy development; CW's updating of the part rhetoric and composition have conventionally played; CW complementing the study of language and literature; CW enhancing a general faculty of 'creativity' (albeit loosely defined). These claims were all raised and stressed during the short-lived introduction of CW as an A-level discipline in British schools (for students who are largely 16-18 years old). A 2009 report by the Government's Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted 2009), *English at the Crossroads*, seemed to encourage the introduction of CW in schools by stressing the importance of developing 'creativity'. It was duly introduced as an A-level subject in September 2013 with considerable expectations pinned on it by teachers and writers (see, for instance, Butt 2015). However, in 2015 the Government's Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) announced that CW would be discontinued from 2017 along with a range of other recently introduced subjects. It was duly withdrawn, notwithstanding the objections raised by professional bodies representing CW and English: National Association for Writers in Education, English Association, National Association for the Teaching of English, University English. Analysing the reasons given by Ofqual for withdrawing the subject, Jonathan Taylor pointed to the slippery middle-ground CW was perceived as occupying in schools:

More broadly, the decision is based on a politicised suspicion of creative and artistic disciplines [...] – a suspicion which is itself riddled with contradictions and paradoxes. Creative Writing is the victim, it seems, of these multiple contradictions and paradoxes: on the one hand, Creative Writing is not seen as academically rigorous enough – it is 'more skills-based than knowledge-based'; on the other, it is too closely connected to so-called 'academic' and 'knowledge-based' subjects such as English. On the one hand, Creative Writing is too vocational to have its own A-Level; on the other hand, more traditional, academic subjects such as English Literature now have to prove their worth – at least at university level – by offering more skills-based, vocational elements, according to the 'employability' agenda. (Taylor, 2015)

It was clear in this instance that there was a missed articulation of the relationship of CW in schools, tentatively introduced, to CW in universities, firmly established.

Arguably, the relationship was not clearly articulated because the *raison d'être* of CW in universities has itself been fuzzily conceptualised, though the discipline seems well settled.

As argued above, the concept of ‘patronage’ has oft been misapplied in relation to CW’s place in universities; equally, as also argued above, a more considered pause on the concept – its specific connotations as ‘supportive patronage’ – clarifies that place. In considering how CW in schools may lead into CW in universities, perhaps it is necessary to address some further questions. When and why do students grasp the possibility of taking up literary writing as a well-defined interest, and moreover as a possible vocation or even profession? When and how is a notion of supportive patronage, as guidance or support by the cognoscenti towards an end, instilled in pre-university education and through socialisation? Students enrolling in university CW programmes at undergraduate level bring this sense of vocation and this hope for patronage with them already, from their schooling. Research into those questions may lead both into further clarification of ‘supportive patronage’ as a system and towards a less tentative space for CW as an independent subject in schools.

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