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The Program Era: Review by Catherine Cole

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Mark McGurl’s book, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, offers a compelling exploration of postwar literary developments in the United States and their parallel relationship with the country’s creative writing programs. McGurl is Professor of English at Stanford, (he was at UCLA when the book was published), and has written extensively on the novel. This book incorporates much of that knowledge but also adroitly couples it with what his publisher calls ‘a meditation on systematic creativity’, the ‘systematic’ largely referring to lessons taught in university creative writing programs. The book won McGurl the 2011 Truman Capote Award for literary criticism and when receiving his award McGurl said: ‘I’m proud to think that I have helped move the conversation about creative writing and the university forward a few steps and shed new light on recent literary history, but humbled by this reminder that contemporary literature is a much larger and richer
enterprise than any one book or critic could grasp.’ (McGurl, Harvard University Press blog)

The book has been well received, its reviewers, including the often curmudgeonly Louis
Menand, noting its importance in the field. Menand, a critic not averse to questioning the
efficacy of creative writing programs, noted in particular the reflective nature of the book and
its emphasis on literary studies within the orbit of creative writing; ‘McGurl’s book is not a
history of creative-writing programs’ he noted. ‘It’s a history of twentieth-century fiction, in
which the work of American writers from Thomas Wolfe to Bharati Mukherjee is read as
reflections of, and reflections on, the educational system through which so many writers now pass.’

McGurl’s primary argument, sustained throughout the book, is that the rise of the creative
writing program represents:

‘the most important event in postwar American literary history, and that paying attention to
the increasingly intimate relation between literary production and the practices of higher
education is the key to understanding the originality of postwar American literature.’ (p. ix)

McGurl is an interesting author who stays true to his quest to transform his readers’
understandings of America’s best-known writers. Not for him the niggardly judgements about
house styles and sameness, pedagogical laziness or the complacent, self-congratulatory
stances creative writing academics are often accused of displaying. He documents the
responses of more strident critics though, including those commentators surprised by the
transformations they were witnessing. These include Alfred Kazin who observed in the
1950s; ‘All this represents a very great change.....When I was in college in the ‘thirties, it
was well understood that scholars were one class and writers quite another.’ (p.22) McGurl
also cites John W. Aldridge who censured writing programs for removing writers from the
‘manifold stimulations of the real world’ and for the ‘damage done to the originality of the
individual authorial voice.’ The result of this, Aldridge said, was the ‘clonal’ fabrication of
writers who produced ‘small, sleek, clonal fabrications of literature.’ (p.26) It’s time to move
beyond these criticisms, McGurl says - to accept that writing programs have been around for
a long time and to acknowledge and draw on that history. And in so doing, he is far more
measured and generous in his appraisal than critics like Kazin or Aldridge or many
contemporary commentators, arguing that creative writing programs have generated complex
literary conversations and dilemmas which have been taken up, wrestled with and resolved by
numerous postwar writers.

That said, McGurl doesn’t simplistically take sides with creative writing either. He may
suggest that creative writing programs have been important and beneficial for American
writing but he also gives full range to his ideas - and full voice to critics and writers -
swerving at times but always focused on the historical, cultural and creative developments of
the postwar era, the supporters, critics and the fence-sitters. As a result this book isn’t a
mouthpiece for the creative writing advocate any more than for the confirmed critic of
creative writing programs. Instead it points to bright, illuminating and often surprising
connections between American writing programs and the writers within and external to them.

McGurl notes early in the book: ‘this book will take up residence in the gap between freedom
and necessity – or rather, in the higher educational institutions that have been built in that
gap.’ (p.3) And he asks, ‘what could be further from the dictates of rote learning... than using
one’s imagination to invent a story or write a poem?’ (p.3) Locating writing programs in their
late 19th century genesis, he then historicises the utopian ideals of the postwar period with its
replication of ‘the spirit of communal endeavour and mutual influence found in the Paris and
McGurl has structured his book so the chapters allow full play to the duality to his expositions. He uses diagrams as well to provide a visual representation of his ideas. Developments in creative writing are thus coupled with developments in literature, the chapter titles making use of those popular if hackneyed admonitions to the student writer which he examines, dates and contextualises in his introduction:

The book’s structure supports this historical flow and its examination of the pre and postwar era in the context of political, social and cultural:

Introduction: Halls of Mirrors

Part One: ‘Write what you know’/ ‘Show Don’t Tell’ (1890 -1960)
1. Autobardolatry: Modernist fiction, Progressive Education, ‘Creative Writing’
2. Understanding Iowa: The Religion of Institutionalization

3. The Social Construction of Unreality: Creative Writing in the Open System

Part Three: Creative Writing at Large (1975 – 2008)
5. The Hidden Injuries of Craft: Mass Higher Education and Lower-Middle-Class Modernism
6. Art and Alma Mater: The Family, the Nation and the Primal Scene of Instruction
7. Miniature America; or, the Program in Transplanetary Perspective

An Afterword offers ‘Systematic Excellence’ in which he provides an interrogation of the role of the literary scholar.

These literary explorations offer the potent comparisons and analyses in the book. Through them the reader discovers engaging and revelatory stories about writers from Nabokov and his frustrations about teaching which in part shaped the narrative voice of Lolita, to the returned soldiers of World War Two, still damaged and bewildered and their exposure in writing classes to Ernest Hemingway and his diamond sharp prose about war, to Flannery O’Connor and the role of her teacher/editors and Raymond Carver, Thomas Pynchon - the list goes on and on, the writers’ work examined within the context of both literary and creative studies. This binary approach makes for excellent reading. McGurl has a fine literary technique, the book offering a novelist’s narrative style.

Carver – America’s ‘postwar Hemingway’ is an interesting example of the writer ‘found’ by higher education, who attended creative writing classes, taught creative writing classes and whose work, McGurl argues, needs to be read in this context. Carver ‘owed’ his literary career to creative writing programs, McGurl says. It should also be noted that Carver is studied extensively in creative writing programs, the sparsity of his stories offering the
student ‘ the possibility of creating an aesthetic whole in the way that writing part of a novel does not’. Carver’s minimalist short stories offer an ‘occasion for aesthetic shame management: the text is small and simple, and the self shaped therein remains under control, dignified and unembarrassed.’ (p.339)

There is much that can be said about the book – its breadth of scope, the historical location of text and creative writing development, the anecdotal writer portraits as well as the literary analysis of their work. It also displays an impressive understanding about and overview of American creative writing programs, one based on thorough and measured research and an objective embedding of literature within them. McGurl thinks much of the criticism of creative writing programs is overblown but he also acknowledges that creative writing programs have not and will continue not to suit all writers – ‘certainly if you want to be the wild man poet, getting a degree to do so is a funny thing to do,’ he says in one interview. (UCLA video, online) While American writing may have lost some of its pretensions to wildness, there is no doubting the impact of writing programs on it.

The book is certainly an excellent resource in regards to the teaching of American literature and the teaching of creative writing. It offers the creative writing teacher the resources to examine and reflect upon the often curious conjoining of writers and scholars. It’s also a fascinating, informative and enjoyable examination of America’s rich literary heritage and the explosion of creativity after the war. It’s a book that offers many encounters and one which a reader will dip into over and over again.

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