

# CREATIVE WRITING: MAPPING THE SUBJECT

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*It is not down in any map; true places never are.*  
Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

My aim is to stitch together a three-part patchwork, to piece together some thoughts on: (i) Creative Writing as an academic discipline; (ii) the textual dynamics and contradictory cultural logic of the map; and (iii) knowledge, particularly the talk of ‘knowledge-based’ education that has driven recent reform in **secondary education**. Under the influence of Michel de Certeau and in light of an examination of the work of the map and of mapping, I will argue that Creative Writing, while it exemplifies a very real mode of knowing, is not and cannot be recognized as a site or space of knowledge by England’s current secondary-educational politics.

## **I) Knowledge in Educational Discourse**

Working in reverse order, let us begin with the third point, with knowledge, and a brief critique of what I have called elsewhere the building-blocks model or view. Broadly speaking, this model depicts knowledge as being built from the ground up, propositional brick by propositional brick.<sup>1</sup> Typically, its proponents presuppose without explicating a good deal about knowledge, language, and the relationship between the two. Though the critical importance of knowledge is continually asserted, what is meant by knowledge is rarely – if ever – defined positively, though it is often defined negatively in opposition to supposedly ‘contentless’ or, in the words of Schools Minister Nick Gibb, ‘joyless’ skills. Indeed, in a speech given at Durham University in early 2016, Gibb felt able to claim that ‘a good education’,

is dependent upon, and impossible without, a fundamental basis of knowledge about the subject in question. Put simply, a commitment

to social justice requires us to place knowledge at the heart of our education system. *And this is not a statement of opinion – it is a fact established by decades of research by cognitive scientists ....*

It is an unfortunate fact, however, that many modern conceptions of education either ignore the importance of knowledge, or actively deride it. During the 1960s, it became fashionable amongst educationists to dismiss the accumulation of knowledge as a joyless anachronism: rote learning of unconnected facts, inflicted upon bored and unwilling pupils. School curricula were increasingly rewritten to focus not upon subject content, but upon skills and dispositions....

It always saddens me to see thrilling content of education, be it timeless literature, scientific wonders, or great historical events, being relegated to a backseat, so that these comparatively joyless ‘skills’ and ‘processes’ can come to the fore.<sup>2</sup>

The building blocks model, then, is one in which language should – when used adequately and accurately; when, that is, we play all the right notes in the right order – reflect the way the world just is. The model is best exemplified – and here, note the grammatical structure and mood of the italicized sentence in which Gibb has recourse to fact over mere opinion – by the simple declarative, itself the paradigmatic form of the fact: statements of birth-and death-dates of historical figures, for example, or straightforward arithmetical or algebraic propositions. What tends to disappear in building-blocks accounts – and we can detect this in the quotation from Gibb – is the functional distinction between personal and shared knowledge, between what a particular person knows and a corpus of common or received knowledge. Space prevents detailed pursuance of this functional distinction, but let me say briefly that shared knowledge does not bypass personal knowledge. Where there are no knowers there is no knowledge; shared knowledge refers to those ill-defined bodies of knowledge (which Gibb presumably has in mind) that must be taken for granted among communities of practitioners: we take it for granted that four-year-olds playing football for the first time know what a ball is, but not (yet) the rules of the game (and, additionally, we may not be able to presume parity among the children as to what they do and do not know). By contrast, we take it for granted that among a team of county-level footballers there is (roughly) equal understanding of the rules

of the game. This shared knowledge, however, exists as shared only because it is embodied and enacted by the individual participants.

So this, in brief, is the model or view against which I am pushing. I should say before moving on, however, that despite my rejection of the building-blocks model I do not adopt an ‘anything-goes’ alternative; nor do I believe that language – being in some mysterious way the lubricious and serpentine social construct that it ‘just is’ – cannot be misused, that words cannot be ‘got wrong’. What I do take seriously, however, is the failure of building-blockers – whether wilful or no – to recognize the productive, expressive powers of their own texts. It is with these powers that all the talk of maps and mapping that is to follow is concerned. And it is with a view of knowledge as *productive and expressive* – as something ‘to be made not given’<sup>3</sup> – that I want to couple Creative Writing.

With the first patch done, onto the map and the work of mapping.

## II) Maps and Mapping

Etymologically, the map has always echoed its own textuality; in derivation, map refers to the sheet or napkin upon which maps would be drawn. Yet – due to received ways or styles of engagement, born of a ‘common sense’ of its function – we often forget or overlook the textuality of the map, taking it as an authoritative text that reflects ‘truly’ the spatial relations and organization of place. While this is true, in a banal sense, of any usable map, the manner in which a map ‘represents’ spatial relations should not be mistaken for something like ‘a realistic representation of the place *itself*’. ‘Realistic-ness’ is either not the currency in which maps deal, or we need to qualify and adjust what we mean by ‘realistic’ and ‘realist’, for maps depict not objects, places themselves, but the spatial *relations* obtaining among things. Where one survey of the cultural history of the map suggests that during the Renaissance the map is a ‘newly created’ – that is, produced – text that is nevertheless taken as a textual ‘mirror of the world’,<sup>4</sup> it is tempting to speculate that what we might call the internal *coherence* of the map itself gets mistaken – as if any sign-system might carve nature exactly at its joints – for the *correspondence* between text and thing.

At this point, I turn to Michel de Certeau, who, in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, recognizes that while the map comes into being first as a record or ledger of journeys taken – and in this way is a sort of traveller’s journal – over time it takes on an autonomy and authority by which it is read as prescribing routes and journeys to be (and, indeed, not to be) taken.<sup>5</sup>

There is, then, a double movement in the map and the work of mapping, for it is when maps appear to be most *prescriptive* that they are also most *productive*. When the map takes on an autonomy, pre- and proscribing this or that route, it ceases to describe the past – the walk already taken – and starts to project, shape, delimit the future.

Maps, then, produce or inaugurate spatial arrangements and relations even as they appear to foreclose the fluid, dynamic possibilities of what de Certeau calls *space*, which he likens to interpretative and creative acts and distinguishes, schematically, from *place* as what is produced by certain ways, styles, habits of dwelling. De Certeau's space is, perhaps counter-intuitively, temporal: it is 'what happens', what punctures the administrative dream of place, when we inhabit or dwell, when we go walking and wandering. By way of brief illustration, we might contrast the administrative dream of the school as an ordered and orderly *place* – mapped not only by floor plans, but also timetables, codes of dress and conduct, and so on – with students' tactical subversions of that orderliness (strict adherence to the one-way system in order to be late for lessons, use and knowledge of surveillance blind-spots). Mapping, as a textual practice, writes or scripts new spatial economies, brings them into being; but in doing so it territorializes, appears or attempts to arrest the dynamism of de Certeau's space. Crucially, de Certeau understands knowledge as inhering in expression and making rather than replication, and his book, as well as 'reflecting' (pointing, describing, referring to) such a view, performs it: in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau walks, meanders, detours through the cities and gardens of modern culture and knowledge.

That, then, is the second patch: a jarring shift from knowledge, perhaps. To stitch these patches together, let's return to Gibb's Durham address, cited earlier. The point I wish to make here is that Gibb's text – and others that, given more space, we might also have considered<sup>6</sup> – have mapped – and this very efficiently – the educational landscape; they have mapped it in the dual, productivist sense just sketched. Even as these texts claim to 'set the record straight', to more truly describe or reflect what knowledge 'really is' and of what a 'good education' 'really consists', what they actually do is reconstitute, rearticulate, produce the meanings of 'knowledge' and 'good education' in the very act of scripting or writing (about) them. These are not secondary accounts that describe an educational world already and simply 'out there'; they are primary documents that articulate that (now utopian, now dystopian) world.

Although I have yet to say anything about Creative Writing as an academic discipline, the foregoing comments point to the need to read Gibb's texts and others like it as deploying certain political-poetical tactics; as *making*, not tracing or copying or 'merely describing'; as casting shadows rather than 'faithful' mirror images. In a sense, I'm accusing them of undisclosed creativity, of committing creative writing: effective because so stealthy; the more so, perhaps, because they do not fully recognise or acknowledge their own creative-tactical operations. Apart from presenting these texts as acts of creative writing, I want to finish my **segment** by turning to the brief career of Creative Writing in the UK secondary school.

### III) Creative Writing in the Classroom

During development of subject content, it became clear that for AS and A Levels in creative writing and health and social care, it has not been possible to draft subject content in accordance with the department's guidance and Ofqual's principles for reformed AS and A Levels. As a result, these subjects will not be developed further.

The DfE's guidance and Ofqual's principles required reformed A-levels to avoid overlap with other subjects, have clearly defined and rigorous content, and be right for progression to Higher Education. It was concluded to be problematic that there are connections between Creative Writing and English, and that Creative Writing is (or could be construed to be) more skills based than knowledge based. Ultimately, this prevented AQA from reforming this qualification.

The above **quotes** may be **familiar**. The first is the DfE's announcement of the discontinuation of the A Level in Creative Writing (and also of Health and Social Care); the second is the notification published by the AQA (the exam board that supported the Creative Writing A Level).<sup>7</sup> Ironically, these announcements were published between approval and publication by the Quality Assurance Agency – the body responsible for monitoring standards in HE – of the Benchmark Statement for Creative Writing in UK universities. Whereas the QAA Benchmark Statement for English defines English as 'a core academic subject' 'compris[ed]' of the 'three complementary strands' of English Literature, English Language, and Creative Writing, the **separate statement** for Creative Writing **alone** states that, '[i]n the UK, the formal

methods of teaching that first began to develop in relation to Creative Writing in the 1970s have now established it as an academic subject in its own right, methodologically independent of English or other “parent” subjects’.<sup>8</sup> Later in the same section, we are told that ‘Creative Writing contributes significantly to related subjects such as English Literature and Language, Drama, Media, Journalism, Film Studies and Theatre Studies. [...] As a subject, [Creative Writing] is naturally interdisciplinary’ (2.11/p.7). Where Creative Writing is first presented or fashioned as an artery supplying the corporate body that is English, now it is a discrete subject with a family resemblance to several others, English *perhaps* – but by no means certainly – first among them.

At the very moment, then, when the discreteness of Creative Writing is being formally asserted in Higher Education, it is being questioned and ultimately effaced in secondary and further education. Here, I return to our central concept or figure of the map: where benchmark statements, policy documents, course specifications, curriculum outlines and the like are often read as being stylistically neutral – strategically bland, perhaps<sup>9</sup> – we must recognize that these ‘road-map’ texts *produce*, they do not ‘merely’ reflect. They are enunciative acts; they constitute the very thing – and thus knowledge of it – that they appear or affect ‘merely’ to describe. And while English and Creative Writing are constituted and emerge in very different – and on some points incommensurable – ways in the Benchmark Statements, at secondary-level Creative Writing has been removed from the map altogether. ‘Secondary English’, ‘English’ in HE, ‘Creative Writing’ – these name the *productive mappings* of very different terrains, and these mappings are indicative of very different educational concerns over the nature of knowledge.

The disciplinary borders of Creative Writing, especially in the UK, and the subject’s relationship to knowledge are also being repeatedly renegotiated and re-mapped from within the academy. Take, for example, an article by Andrew Cowan of UEA, entitled ‘Blind Spots: What Creative Writing Doesn’t Know’, published by the journal *TEXT* in 2011.<sup>10</sup> In this article, a resistance to the theorization of Creative Writing – that is, theory drawing on the language of ‘outside’ discourses and disciplines (sociology, philosophy, and so on) – produces, in the very articulation of that resistance, a theoretically-inflected anti-theory that seeks to defend both the uniqueness of Creative Writing and its standard pedagogical practices, principally the workshop. Part of Cowan’s defence of Creative Writing rests

on the opposition of literary practice and literary knowledge. Neither term is defined, though what appears to be meant by literary practice emerges in the course of analysis and argument more clearly than what is meant by literary knowledge. I touch on this piece, however briefly, for two reasons. Firstly, because it is interesting that, while the educational politics of Cowan and Gibb, not to mention the DfE and Ofqual, are very different, incompatible even, all use a similar tactic – the opposition of knowledge and skills/practice – in order to advance or rationalize their arguments. Secondly, it is with the opposition of knowledge and practice/skills in relation to Creative Writing that I wish to conclude. With this, then, we return to de Certeau.

One of the tropes running through de Certeau's book is narrativity, both the strategic, normative narratives that structure public culture – what he calls 'the scriptural economy' – and the narratological tactics by which norms are resisted, turned back on themselves, ironized. One such narratological tactic de Certeau considers is the walk. By walking, he claims, *place* becomes re-articulated or reconstituted as *space*, in the sense outlined above. If 'place' is ordered, regulated, 'proper', then '*space is a practiced place*'. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers. In the same way, an act of reading is the space produced by the practices of a particular place' (117). The productivist model of knowing I favour, *pace* de Certeau, is not unique to Creative Writing; but its standard pedagogical practices do lay bare the practical, situated, embodied nature of all *personal* knowledge: knowledge as inhering in expression. As we have seen, the logic underpinning the distinction of literary knowledge and practice can be detected both in defences of Creative Writing (such as Cowan's) and rationalizations of its discontinuation (DfE/Ofqual); in equal measure, this logic fails or refuses to see Creative Writing as a site of knowledge, and – critically – other Englishes as sites of practice. Typically, Creative Writing students produce so-called 'creative' and 'critical' or 'reflective' texts: the first type produces a terrain by taking a walk; the second maps it, explicates the itinerary and strategies of exploration. The most important thing for me about this standard practice – which is not without its problems, though discussion is beyond the scope of this article – is that it punctures the seal separating so-called (literary) knowledge and practice. The practices that Creative Writing typically asks its student to engage in re-enact the productive, textual nature of the map, while threatening the conception of the map as 'true' reflection or depiction. And it is this latter image – or operation – of the map as true or faithful copy that secondary

education currently favours. I do not for a moment mean to suggest that the Englishes Language and Literature are not creative – far from it. But standard pedagogical practices have mapped these disciplines so that success is – more so than in Creative Writing – measured by assessing the propriety of moves made, of students’ ability to follow Ariadne’s thread out of a more or less readymade labyrinth. Compared to English Literature and Language, Creative Writing has been constituted as a more cartographic discipline; students are asked both to lay the thread *and* map the process of the laying. It seems to me that if one can do this, one can surely be said to know something. But this is a way of knowing that secondary education in England currently cannot – and looks, for now, unlikely to – recognize.

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### References

- 1 I have dealt in greater detail with issues of knowledge in English education **in more detail** in a previous article for this journal: Belas, O. (2016), ‘Practically Speaking: Doing English in a Knowledge Economy’, *The Use of English* 68.1, pp. 56–63.
- 2 Gibb, N. (2016), ‘Nick Gibb: What is a Good Education in the 21st Century?’, Gov. uk, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/what-is-a-good-education-in-the-21st-century>, retrieved 18/02/17 (emphasis added). I offer more detailed exemplification and analysis of the building-blocks model in ‘Education, Knowledge, and Symbolic Form’ (**forthcoming**).
- 3 Medway, P., quoted by Harold Rosen in a 1981 lecture, ‘Neither Bleak House nor Liberty Hall’, *Harold Rosen: Writings on Life, Language, and Learning, 1958–2008* (ed. John Richmond; London: UCL Institute of Education Press, 2017), p.86.
- 4 Whitfield, P. (2000), *Mapping the World: A History of Exploration* (London: The Folio Society), p.14.
- 5 De Certeau, M. (1984), *The Practice of Everyday Life* (trans. Steven Randall; Berkeley: University of California Press); see, in particular, chapter IX.
- 6 Christodoulou, D. (2014), *The Seven Myths about Education* (Abingdon: Routledge); Gibb, N. (2015), ‘How E.D. Hirsch Came to Shape UK Government Policy’, in Simons and Porter (eds) (2015), *Knowledge and the Curriculum: A Collection of Essays to Accompany E.D. Hirsch’s Lecture at Policy Exchange* (London: Policy Exchange), <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/knowledge-and-the-curriculum.pdf>, retrieved 20/02/17, pp.2-20; Gibb, ‘What is a Good Education in the 21st Century?’; Gove, M. (2009), ‘What is Education For?’, RSA address, <http://>

- [www.thersa.org/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/213021/Gove-speech-to-RSA.pdf](http://www.thersa.org/data/assets/pdf_file/0009/213021/Gove-speech-to-RSA.pdf), retrieved 27/02/17; Morgan, N. (2014), 'Speech: Nicky Morgan Speaks at Launch of Your Life Campaign', Gov.uk, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nicky-morgan-speaks-at-launch-of-your-life-campaign>, retrieved 31/01/17.
- 7 DfE(2015), 'Additional reformed GCSE and A Level subject content consultation', <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/24261/1/Additional-reformed-GCSE-and-A-level-subject-content-consultation.pdf>, and NAWE, AQA's notice of the discontinuation of the Creative Writing A Level, <http://www.nawe.co.uk/DB/nawe-news/creative-writing-a-level.html>; both retrieved 17/02/17.
  - 8 QAA (2015), *Subject Benchmark Statement: English*, <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/SBS-English-15.pdf>, 1.3/p.5; QAA (2016), *Subject Benchmark Statement: Creative Writing*, <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/SBS-Creative-Writing-16.pdf>, 2.1/p.6.
  - 9 Rosen makes a similar point regarding the 'illusory ideology-free neutrality' of the state school, its aims, function, and workings (*ibid.*, p.82).
  - 10 Cowan, A. (2011), 'Blind Spots: What Creative Writing Doesn't Know', *TEXT* 15.1, <http://www.textjournal.com.au/april11/cowan.htm>. See also the following responses: Jarvis, T. (2011), "Pleasure balks, bliss appears" or "The apparatus shines like a blade": Towards a Theory of a Progressive Reading Praxis in Creative Writing Pedagogy', *TEXT* 15.2, <http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct11/jarvis.htm#smi2r>; Neave, L. (2012), 'Teaching Writing Process', *TEXT* 16.1, <http://www.textjournal.com.au/april12/neave.htm>; Cowan, A. (2012), 'A Life Event, a Life Event: The Workshop that Works', *TEXT* 16.1, <http://www.textjournal.com.au/april12/cowan.htm#wan2r>. All retrieved 17/02/17.