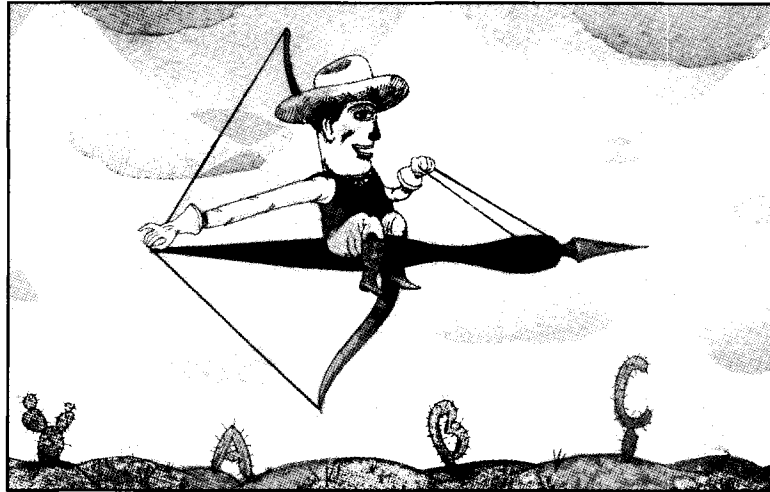


Cowboys and Indians

A Few Notions About Creative Writing

by George Garrett



This little piece requires a head note. Oddly, it is the only thing I have ever written that was honest-to-God censored. I was asked by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* to write a short opinion piece on the subject of contemporary creative writing courses, etc.—the scene. I wrote this piece, following their guidelines exactly for length and general tone. After a while it came back to me with the explanation that they didn't approve of my opinions. Not at all. They didn't even suggest revising my opinions. Beyond the pale. See if you can figure out why. I can't.

In the beginning we were the rebels. The real beginning was during the late 40's and early 50's, that astonishing time of the GI Bill when American colleges and universities were suddenly booming and changing. We asked for courses in 20th-century literature, and we got that, together with fair and accurate warning from the elders that the canon would, sooner or later, constitute a bloody battlefield. Along with that we wanted the opportunity to write our poems and stories and novels on the institution's time and for credit. Won that one, too, and so completely that now there are poets and writers teaching writing courses in hundreds of colleges and universities. It has been a radical change far beyond the wildest expectations of the very few of us, raggedy in our faded fatigues and field jackets, who came out of the jungle and mountains to civilization. Our fearless leader (Fidel) was (is) R.V. Cassill, first at Iowa, then Brown. We were few in number as late as the middle 60's when Cassill and his wife, Kay, founded and managed the Associated Writing Programs (AWP) in the basement of their house in

Providence. There were a dozen or so member institutions then, though there were already many schools with writers on the faculty and with courses and programs. We had so little visibility and money and clout at first that other writers and schools took a wait-and-see attitude and maintained that until, finally, AWP got some real support, big bucks. Then, led by Iowa, which had spurned joining anything with others, everybody jumped on board. Nowadays there is a headquarters with a paid bureaucracy and a newsletter and a job list and prizes and annual conventions and plenty of members eager to be elected to a list of officers. A new (ancient) crowd.

And here am I, an old-timer already, still following the leader (Cassill said it first, if differently) urging that we now take a giant step back and at least weigh and reconsider the values and dangers arising out of the association of writers with the academy. Undergraduate creative writing courses probably should continue, be kept alive and well. Close reading and closely watched writing are essential components in the lost battles against functional illiteracy. It's most of the graduate programs I wonder about, the ones that these days furnish so many books to publishers and most of the teachers of creative writing. There are superb writing programs. Hollins College is the best. And a very different kind of program at Arkansas is equally praiseworthy. Most of them, however, are depressingly uniform and uniformly mediocre. Just lately there have been some strong, cogently argued critical pieces about writing programs. Eve Shelnutt's "Notes From a Cell: Creative Writing Programs in Isolation" (*AWP Chronicle*, February 1990) and John W. Aldridge's "American Assembly-Line Fiction" (*American Scholar*, Winter 1990) make strong cases against the acquired bad habits and results of writing programs. Both are critical of the anti-intellectualism (read: *ignorance*) of the programs, the hierarchical networking (what Aldridge calls "this highly politicized fraternity of writing instruction"); and both are seriously con-

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cerned by the absence of normative models and of eclectic diversity in the programs and their products and, also, by the changing relationship of the writer and society.

These points are well taken, but I have others, based on years of experience in the trenches as an employee of several different kinds of institutions. Seems to me that our colleges and universities—I speak almost exclusively of the vague humanities, sparing science, engineering, etc., where, even in the most theoretical of modes, there is less tinkering with and distortion of hard facts—are a mirror image of the world and the times they inhabit. The institutions are not nearly as separate from the common vices and virtues of the age as they often imagine themselves to be; though both vices and virtues are often camouflaged by a certain respectability, which Americans, innocently enough, still attribute to educators and educational institutions. Thus, I have to argue that there are probably no more liars, thieves, cheaters, polluters (real and metaphorical), criminals, and invincibly ignorant incompetents within the institutions than there are in society at large. But no fewer either.

Once upon a time in Los Angeles, I found myself at lunch with a group of talent agents, sharks of the movie industry, where conversation was all about the insatiable appetites of the great white sharks at the top of the Hollywood food chain. Eager to join in, I told them a couple of anecdotes about feeding frenzy in academe. Shocked them thoroughly. Left them open-mouthed. “Do you mean people like that are allowed to teach our children?” they asked.

Our contemporary institutions of higher learning are built on the corporate model without benefit of the checks and balances that are required to produce a worthwhile product and to turn a profit. To the pervasive administrative inefficiency and complacency and incompetence that has always plagued us must be added a full share of the other woes and faults and tribulations of the age. We have more than enough of our own Boesky's and Trumps and Milkens. And some of them are poets and fiction writers who know no other world or way of life. One good reason for writers to dissociate themselves from academe is to avoid the bad company there, including the bad company of each other.

But there are some better reasons. One of these is the chill-

ing effect on freedom of speech and thought that is felt, not only aesthetically but also politically and socially by writers in an academic context these days. Since amiable visibility and consequent prizes and honors are urgently important to the artist in academe, there is a serious disincentive to any experimentation beyond the most commonplace gimmickry and any exploitation of unfashionable notions that might seem to challenge the *beaux arts* establishment. Originality is defined as finding your place and staying in it. On an aesthetic level this deprives us all of variety (choices). On a political and social level, with the brown- and black-shirt children of the 60's now safely arrived at middle age and position in academe, there is a tendency toward an unquestioning, reflexive uniformity of thought and language, which limits intellectual inquiry and discourages the kind of critical scrutiny out of which true innovation may come to pass. If “correct” political and social stances are required for promotion and tenure (and they certainly are), the artist will either conform or, anyway, limit himself/herself to the aesthetic level of experience.

Is it any wonder that we have just finished a decade of some of the most polished and boring poetry and some of the most competent and inconsequential fiction in our national history? If the situation were not so dangerous, it would be simply farcical.

Easy and safe to say for one so near to retirement age anyway, but nevertheless I am convinced that we have now outgrown the good (and there was some) of the close association of writers and academe. Writers would be better off in almost any other line of work. An exception is those underclass and minority writers whose voices, previously unheard, would be lost to us again without some special support. And, of course, such a course would be hard on the poets, many of whom lack even basic entry-level skills; but perhaps this could be corrected by programs in vocational training.

Yesterday's rebels are today's fat cats, and the last great concentration of unreconstructed Marxists (not counting Albania) is now to be found in our English departments. My view is simply that writers, young and old, will be well advised to slip out of the circle of wagons and rejoin the lively Indians riding on the outside.

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Light

Peter Hunt

See how this elm, lit underneath by sun
In early afternoon, its Autumn leaves
A fiery gold, not yet limp and dun,
But crisply-gleaming flakes in solid sheaves,
Fades to pale yellow when the flame expires,
A brief reflected blaze gone out when twilight
Settles in, as time-bound earth requires,
All borrowed lustre soon eclipsed by night.
Oh, let not my declining life, though gone
My body's strength, be burnished by a gold
That quickly fades like leaves, at evening wan
And sinking sodden in the yellowing cold.
But let my sovereign Sun of life Divine,
Burning bright on me, eternal shine.