

(Note: This essay was published in a literary magazine a number of years ago, a magazine that still sort of exists (under a new name) but that does not make the essay available online. Under the assumption that it never will, I have decided to make it available here. Although the references are somewhat dated, my argument that creative writing programs need to include a critical component seems to me still relevant.)

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Not Merely Academic:
Creative Writing and Literary Study

In his essay “Creative Writing and Its Discontents” (*The Writer’s Chronicle*, March/April 2000), D. W. Fenza defends university creative writing programs against what he considers the distressingly widespread assumptions that they contribute to a kind of “dumbing down” of literary culture and that they lack the rigor necessary for them to be truly valuable parts of a university curriculum, much less to produce significant new writers. Unapologetically partisan on behalf of creative writing as an academic discipline, Fenza marshals together all of the arguments (which he presents in a 13-point list for added emphasis) that can be, and generally have been, offered as justifications for including creative writing in the curriculum, although one would have thought that these justifications had long since carried the day in practical terms, since it seems highly unlikely that any prominent colleges or universities will very soon seek to abolish their programs, either on the undergraduate or graduate levels. After all, it is the very popularity of creative writing in American colleges that to a large extent has prompted the criticisms Fenza seeks to refute.

Fenza seems especially sensitive to the charge, in this case made from within the profession itself, that creative writing programs pay insufficient attention to the career prospects of their students, that they merely exploit the vanity and ambitions of these students without preparing them realistically for the exigencies of the literary marketplace or enabling them to pursue more reliable professional goals. As Fenza

paraphrases one such challenge to the integrity of creative writing, David Radavich's "Creative Writing in the Academy (in MLA's *Profession 1999*), "writers in the academy should earn traditional Ph.Ds and become more like scholars." This is undoubtedly an oversimplification of Radavich's argument (as Radavich indeed insists it is in a reply to Fenza in the September 2000 issue of *Writer's Chronicle*), but the tension between a view of creative writing as a service to literature and a view of it as a service to the academy surely does inform the analysis of the role of creative writing offered by both Fenza and Radavich. Unfortunately, while both writers maintain, sincerely, no doubt, that the future of literature is their ultimate concern, neither is actually able to separate the continuity of "literature" from its current status as primarily an academic "subject." Fenza sees the future of literature as continuing to be closely bound to the study of literature as part of the academic curriculum; he merely wishes to see creative writing survive, on its own terms, as a branch of the literary curriculum. Radavich also does not envision the abandonment of creative writing by academe; he wishes to see it become more like other disciplines, with even closer ties to the academy, which he believes will help ensure its survival. To this extent, the conflict between D. W. Fenza and David Radavich amounts to a struggle over how best to define "creative writing" so that it continues as a viable subject within the university.

I would like to suggest in this essay that if the long-term vitality either of creative writing or of literature as a whole is truly at issue here, then neither of the sides in this skirmish presents a very defensible position. Fenza, who correctly points out the way in which the English department, through the rise of what he simply calls "theory," has increasingly foregone the teaching of literature as a subject of humane learning, does not advocate the severing of ties with this department, even though the metamorphosis of English into a radicalized branch of sociology has done more harm to the image of literary study, a part of which Fenza wishes creative writing to remain, than any of the "cultural pundits" he cites could ever have done on their own. Fenza proposes instead that creative writing serve as a kind of counterbalance to theory in today's English department—its heart as opposed to the pure intellect provided by theory—and that exposure to both would ideally give students a more fully satisfying literary education. Radavich, in calling for creative writing to integrate itself even more fully into the current

academic structure, would presumably have the boundaries separating creative writing courses from the rest of the literature curriculum reduced, thus blurring the distinctions that can still be made between instruction in the art of writing fiction, poetry, drama, and creative nonfiction and instruction in the finer points of scholarly and critical analysis.

It is not that both Fenza and Radavich are entirely misguided in their analyses. Creative writing does now allow students to cultivate a more agreeable, less mediated relationship with literature, whether or not all students go on to become successful writers themselves. Certainly it does not produce graduates trained to be hostile to the very idea of literature. Further, I do not think Radavich is wrong in at least implying that creative writing and the study of literature could more comfortably inhabit the same professional space, even that the perceived divide between the goals of the creative writing class and those of the literature class might be bridged. But the cause of creative writing will not finally be helped, nor ultimately will an idea of literature of the sort creative writing needs to maintain a coherent identity even likely itself survive, as long as the latter continues in most cases simply as a “major” attached to, and dependent on, the English department. The problem here cannot be construed as primarily administrative; additional autonomy, especially on the graduate level, to define goals or set standards without accompanying curricular control would be no solution to what is finally more than an academic problem. In my opinion, creative writing programs need increasingly to be fashioned not merely as literature’s branch of applied knowledge but as the very center of debate about, inquiry into, and, yes, instruction in literature itself.

This would mean that everyone who shares the ideals to which Fenza appeals, as well as everyone who understands, as does Radavich, the rules of engagement that obtain in the new corporate university (whether they approve of them or not) would need to begin anticipating the day when the study of literature as it has been known in the post-World War II era has undeniably become a relic of that era. Although the process whereby literature ceases to be seen as a legitimate academic subject in its own right is already well advanced, attempts are still made by those who speak for the disciplinary establishment (the MLA, for example) to deny that college literature courses no longer focus on “the literary” in any constructive way, indeed that the very concept has been discarded when not actively reviled. Such denials are somewhat peculiar, since no one,

either among those thus spoken for or among those whose criticisms elicit such responses in the first place, believes they are offered with any sincerity, much less believes them to be true. In any case, the need to keep hiding behind Literature will almost certainly be short-lived, mostly because the constituency for a curriculum based on the serious study of literary art has never been very large, and should the literature curriculum finally give way to a curriculum explicitly labeled “cultural studies,” whatever minimal outrage that could be mustered on behalf of literary study will already have been spent.

Could creative writing survive the final collapse of the structural supports propping up the study of literature in American universities? In my view, there is very little reason to believe that it could, at least not if it simply continues to assume its present form. As Fenza’s own brief history of creative writing in the academy demonstrates, the rise of creative writing closely parallels the rise of literary study itself—that is, literary study as the study of literature for its own sake, rather than as a source of philological or other purely historical inquiry. Unfortunately, creative writing came to have the same relationship to the “real” literature curriculum that literary study had once had to philology: such courses were regarded by the literature scholar as less serious, less important to the mission of the university, and were at best tolerated as courses that might help recruit students into the English department, where they would still be required to take the more rigorous courses that defined literary study as an academic discipline (and that were taught by these scholars, of course). Creative writing’s status as literary study’s wayward cousin may have involved more than a little condescension and even outright ill-will, but it could be said that their uneasy coexistence nevertheless benefited both—literary study through the enhanced enrollment just mentioned, and creative writing through an association with the discipline entrusted with the professing of literature, which until recently did manage to project an aura of seriousness in whose reflected glow creative writing programs could shine sufficiently that they were on the whole not regarded as either purely vocational (as essentially an extension of arts-and-crafts) or as opportunities for students merely to satisfy personal vanity or indulge in aimless subjectivity.

This aura has palpably faded. Although literature professors continue to take themselves seriously indeed (it is hard to imagine a species of literary scholarship more

humorless than what goes by that name today), the public image of the English faculty has been tarnished beyond restoration. For a while the abandonment of interest in literature as it was traditionally studied met with some resistance and statements of concern. Now the English department is more likely to be considered as a national joke, an object of ridicule and derision. To persist in an already unequal partnership under these circumstances is likely only to inflict collateral damage on the reputation of creative writing and ultimately sacrifice whatever chance remains to salvage the good name of literature itself. It is clear that the literature curriculum, which for the past half century has been seen as essentially identical with the very mission of the English department, is no longer in the hands of people who regard its integrity as something to be protected. But without such a curriculum in some form, creative writing programs would hardly be tenable, deprived as they would be of the context and the history without which “creative writing” becomes a fundamentally empty concept.

What specifically, then, could be done to avert such an outcome? If nothing else, creative writing faculty members should forcefully oppose the belittlement of literature in English departments—and, in fact, if anecdotal evidence can be trusted, there is actually reason to believe this is to some extent taking place. While relations between creative writing professors and “regular” literature faculty have never been particularly congenial, it seems fair to say that at present the conceptual and procedural differences between the two have never been more pronounced. The former still believe in the relevance of literature, the latter do not. The former still consider the identifiably “literary” qualities of the writing they teach to be their true subject, and the latter do not. Perhaps simply by holding on to these beliefs, creative writing faculty and students can lead by example in making a case for the serious consideration of literary art within the university.

But unfortunately this would not be a truly decisive victory. If simply allowing literary art itself to flourish is the object, it is difficult to see why maintaining its presence in the university alone would be considered any kind of victory at all. Unless we have come to the point of conceding that literature cannot flourish outside the university—that in order for it to survive in modern American culture it had to be transformed into Literature, presided over by a self-selected caste of academic masters—why would it be thought important that literature even in a diminished state had managed to hold on to a

neglected piece of ground inside the walls of academe? The initial advocates of including literary study in the college curriculum were able to carry the day by arguing that literature deserved its place in the curriculum because of its own inherent value to those who thus encountered it; that literary study could also enhance the appeal and credibility of academe might be a secondary benefit, but the elevation of the academic over the literary, an allegiance to the academic per se, was certainly not part of the original vision.

Because creative writing programs almost necessarily continue to maintain an allegiance to literature, creative writing can potentially serve as the agent charged with preserving its integrity within the academy and in the process ensure its own survival as a discipline devoted to developing and promoting contemporary prose, poetry, and drama. However, to accomplish these related goals would require ambitions more expansive than those expressed by Fenza and less purely utilitarian than those informing Radavich's account. Yet, the justification for broadening the horizons within which we may view the proper boundaries of creative writing is provided by both writers, who might after all be said to share a common understanding of the potential of creative writing when its goals are conceived more comprehensively. Fenza maintains that "the study of literature is simply incomplete without creative writing, just as the study of creative writing is incomplete without the scholarship and appreciation of the great literature of the past. The literature of the past can seem remote and irrelevant without the controversies of contemporary letters to animate it, just as contemporary letters can be shallow and vain without a knowledge of the older legacies of literature." Radavich, for his part, believes that "[a]ny creative writing course worth its enrollment needs to teach reading, critical thinking, and awareness of historical context, as well as the particulars of form and evocative expression." Both are surely right, and perhaps both would further come to agree that rather than creative writing continuing to seek a modus vivendi with literary study as administered by an English department that at the very least has proven itself inherently mercurial, it would be more productive to incorporate within creative writing a curriculum of literary study of its own—to in effect take from English some of the kinds of literature courses that were once at the very core of its identity.

Such a move might seem implausible, the necessity for it not yet obvious or the moment for it not yet ripe. Under existing circumstances, a takeover of the literature

curriculum would probably have to be a hostile one, although the possibility that the most “progressive” English departments are already indifferent enough to literature and its future that the battle would not be that intense should not be quickly dismissed. However, in proposing a new Department of Creative Writing and Literary Criticism I am not so much suggesting that such an entity should immediately be created, or even that my version of it ought to prevail, as that the concept itself is not at all outlandish, is in fact quite sensible and eminently practical, and that if it were to be put into practice, perhaps with just a few of the more adventurous colleges and some more enlightened faculty leading the way, it would prove to be a coherent, potentially satisfying solution to the problem I have endeavored here to identify. In the remainder of this essay, I would like to explain further what this department might look like and what it might accomplish in terms of the more immediate goal of upholding a legitimate role in the academic curriculum for the serious study of literature, but also toward the ultimately even more important goal of reimagining the nature of that role, as well as the contributions of creative writing and of the literature course in defining it.

The first step in making a department that joins creative writing with any kind of formal literary study at all possible would probably have to be an initial willingness to put aside the bad feelings that have developed as a result of the fifty-year-old cold war between the two. Few could deny that literature professors, on the whole, tend to have a patronizing attitude toward creative writing, while creative writers, students and faculty, justifiably resent the ill-disguised sneers and frequently enough express their own hostility toward and outright contempt for the courses offered by the literature professors. (Fenza describes this conflict rather diplomatically: “scholars, literary theorists, and writers are not compatible in their endeavors or temperaments, and they, necessarily, will be compelled to criticize one another to protect and promote what they believe to be crucial to the enjoyment of literature and its future.”) I myself recall how impatient many of my fellow creative writing students were with the literature courses we were required to take in the graduate creative writing program I attended, and later, when I was working toward a Ph. D in literary study, I heard equally harsh and intolerant things said by both

graduate students and literature faculty about the alleged shortcomings of creative writing.

The current partition between creative writing and literary study is, in my view, entirely artificial, a product of academic politics and of the historical contingencies that brought both subjects into academe in the first place. Perhaps the differing expectations and assumptions of the would-be literary scholar and the apprentice poet or novelist reflect real differences in temperament that have always obtained between the critical and creative sensibilities, but surely these differences do not have to prevent the critic and the creative writer from finding common cause by acknowledging the differences but also acknowledging that these differences could actually enrich a departmental curriculum the ultimate goal of which was to offer students a meaningful opportunity to consider both the aesthetic and the exegetic possibilities of serious writing in all of its forms. Arguably in such a department the former should retain pride of place, since it is the special status of literary writing that justifies singling it out to begin with, and this status is conferred precisely because of the perceived aesthetic qualities distinguishing literature from other kinds of writing. In agreeing, in effect, that creative writing would be the curricular core of this department, the literary critics in its ranks would be abjuring the view that criticism is a singular activity bearing only an incidental relation to the literary texts it considers and would avow that critics and writers are engaged in mutually reinforcing activities.

Creative writers, on the other hand, would also have to grant that the practice of criticism, of bringing works of literature under careful but respectful analysis and of making critical judgments, is not a distraction from or threat to the purity of literature. They would be correct, in fact, if they were to go further and affirm that literature only benefits from engaged and conscientious criticism, that without this accompanying critical element literary art risks becoming perceived as excessively subjective, essentially personal in its appeal and ultimately regarded by some, perhaps, as not genuinely worthy of the attention of serious-minded people. The cause of literature (not to mention the future of creative writing in the academy, which could not be sustained shorn of all association with the idea of literature, at least as a goal to be pursued), is not served by either an attitude of condescension toward the “mere” exercise of imagination

or by resentment toward the alleged impositions of literary criticism, and an academic department that attempted to integrate the creative and the critical would have to repudiate this kind of useless conflict.

As someone with both a graduate degree in creative writing and a doctoral degree in literary study, who has taught both creative writing classes and conventional literature courses, I believe I have acquired a perspective by which to judge whether a department that did attempt to integrate mastery of craft and critical analysis would have a plausible chance of succeeding in its goal. An immediate requirement my proposal would need to meet, of course, is simple clarity about how such a department might be structured. While I don't think a detailed listing of possible courses would be very useful in the context of the present essay, it is appropriate to explain in general terms how a balancing of ends and means could bring a necessary coherence to the department's curriculum, no matter what specific courses get included at any one time. If "mastery of craft" is to be truly integrated with the exercise of critical intelligence, then "craft" must be at the core of instruction in both creative writing and literary analysis. That is, the goal of instruction in the latter should be, at least in part, to acquaint students with the skills they would need to become practicing literary critics. (At the same time, one would not want to foreclose entirely the possibility that some students, particularly undergraduates, might benefit from classes of either type in personal, unquantifiable ways separate from their ultimate vocational benefits.)

Among these skills I do not include those currently associated with academic "scholarship." Most of what is now called literary scholarship cannot really be considered criticism in any historically cogent sense of the term, although it has in practice certainly all but occupied the territory once claimed by independent literary criticism. As a result, while creative writing instruction tends to be, at its best, dynamic and interactive, literary instruction under the domination of the scholarly paradigm encourages passivity, even in the case of those students who acquire the skills required to become literary scholars, since the mastery of these skills is almost never itself the focus of most courses. Direct engagement with the texts at hand, especially in the form of sustained, dispassionate analysis, is inevitably discouraged in these circumstances, as such an approach must succumb to the scholarly imperative to produce "new knowledge"—and this imperative

is most obviously met by subjecting literary texts to various kinds of “theoretical” reflections rather than producing interpretations, no matter how rigorous, based on close reading.

This is why New Criticism, for example, which did emphasize the centrality of close reading in the study of literature, was destined to be discarded as criticism came to be superseded by scholarship. Despite the myriad methodological objections its opponents have raised against it, its fatal flaw within the academic context was that its profoundest dedication was to literature rather than the academy. I do not suggest that the brand of literary criticism purveyed by a department of Creative Writing and Literary Criticism must be something like that advanced by the New Critics (especially as accompanied by the overarching claims of what Curtis White, in a recent essay that otherwise attempts a limited rehabilitation of New Criticism, calls “New Critical metaphysics”¹), but for this department to avoid the cycling and recycling of intellectual fashion that has caused the English department to drift gradually into irrelevance, it would need to encourage critical approaches that seek to elucidate and evaluate works of literature because of the intrinsic value of the effort rather than as a means to other ends, ends that usually amount to the reinforcement of the values most strongly held by the academy.

The best way to avoid pledging fealty to academic values would be to adopt a curriculum that resists being fixed in place, refuses to be established, however fleetingly, as an authoritative expression of what is “essential” to the study and practice of writing. Such a curriculum might offer survey courses of literature according to period or genre or ethnic/national identity, but only because those teaching the courses believed them to be useful for anyone wishing to write about literature in an informed way. Creative writing workshops in their current form might continue to be offered as a demonstrably effective method of instruction, but perhaps other courses could experiment with alternative methods of, say, integrating writing instruction with critical reading, or even could substitute individual mentoring for the traditional classroom. While certain minimal requirements for obtaining a degree, whether undergraduate or graduate, from this department would have to be devised, these requirements would ideally be as flexible as

¹ Curtis White, “The Wrong Idea,” *Bookforum* (Winter 2000, pp.34-35; 51-52).

possible while also embodying the core principle that all courses contribute to the education of writers and critics. (Although it would also be desirable that any particular course be potentially useful or interesting to non-majors, or graduate students from other departments.) The ultimate decision about the kind of course offered, and about the scope and approach of the course, in other words, ought to be made by individual instructors, who would be implicitly considered the appropriate authority about both the subject at hand and its role in furthering the department's underlying objectives.

Such a department as this would most likely attract—should seek to attract—those students whose interest in creative writing extends to a wider interest in the nature of literature as a whole, as well as those whose interest in literature prompts them to recognize that its vitality in the present, and its potential to remain a valid mode of expression, are at least as important as its accomplishments in the past or its convenience as a subject of critical discourse. It might no longer attract students for whom either creative writing or the study of literature is largely an exercise in self-indulgence—students who romanticize or idealize the writer's role, who balk at the real work required to write serious prose, poetry, or drama, who ultimately view writing not as a craft to be learned, nor even as a calling to be followed where it leads, but as an appealing, although temporary, diversion. In my experience, as both student and professor, such students are common enough around both creative writing programs and English departments, and while they may help to foster a kind of bohemian atmosphere some of us find otherwise appealing (and help fill the classes that keep each of these entities in business), the more focused, frankly more pragmatically organized department envisioned here would probably not easily accommodate the looser allegiance of this sort of student to the literary values it would seek to advance.

This department additionally might prove less attractive to the kind of student who now majors in English as undergraduate preparation for later study in professional schools such as law or business. It could certainly still be possible to acquire from Creative Writing and Literary Criticism the enhanced writing and analysis skills the pre-professional student presumably would be seeking, but its emphasis on more directly cultivating a commitment to a literary vocation is not likely to seem as serviceable as the broadly distributed array of courses offered currently by most departments of English.

Perhaps it is odd to advocate an academic curriculum that probably will interest fewer students than would an approach that announced less strictly delineated goals; however, I believe that the decline of English into its present desuetude was in part caused by its capacity to be—or to try to be—everything to everyone, to the point that it now has essentially no identity at all. A discipline that made clear its loyalty to the cause of literature would have the virtue not only of validating the importance of that cause but of insulating itself from the most hazardous winds of academic fashion, which, unfortunately, have tended to swirl at their fiercest in and around the English department.

Certainly one could anticipate objections to a proposal such as this, although the most strenuous would not come, I would guess, from the literature professors whose approaches to literary scholarship are currently dominant—those caught up in this era’s intellectual haut couture. They have no special partiality for the disciplinary structure as it is currently configured, and would no doubt be just as content to do their work out of Anthropology, or History, or Communication, or a new and autonomous department of Cultural Studies. The remaining unrepentant humanists in the American academy are more likely to find this proposal unacceptable, a solution at least as discouraging as the problem it seeks to solve. However, as even they increasingly admit (through, for example, the titles of recent books such as *Literature Lost* and *The Rise and Fall of English*), the humanists’ ranks continue to dwindle, especially in the elite universities, and a good case could be made (I have attempted to do so in “Inventing Literature,” *American Book Review*, November/December 2000) that their own collective efforts to assimilate literature to the norms of academe was an initial step on the path leading to the very morass of conflicting assumptions they now decry. In the end, the humanist scholars of literature cannot disclaim the process by which it becomes subordinated in the academy to a non-literary agenda; they can only insist that the agenda should properly be theirs.

Yet given the picture that emerges from the survey of the academic landscape provided by Fenza and Radavich (on which I have attempted to enlarge), it may turn out that creative writing programs will de facto be required to incorporate some elements of traditional literary study simply in order to accomplish their goals as these are currently defined. An English department that no longer reliably offers a literary education in any

even nominally useful form will not be the at least indirect ally it has been—albeit somewhat inconstantly—during the period of creative writing’s ascendancy. At best creative writing could come to seem merely an ornament, the last tenuous connection to an era when its concern for the artistic possibilities of literature still formed part of the department’s ostensible identity; at worst it could be perceived as wholly irrelevant to the ambitions of whatever kind of hybrid discipline English becomes and cast adrift anyway, left with no obvious alternative affiliation and no functional curriculum of its own. In any case, merely maintaining the status quo, as Fenza more or less wishes to do, could prove to be inadequate to the task of preserving creative writing in the academy, and while professionalizing the creative writing degree according to more conventional academic models, as Radavich would prefer, might protect it from institutional disregard, it would do almost nothing to elevate—indeed could only diminish—the status of literature.

Thus, the most compelling objection to any proposal to consolidate creative writing and literary study in the name of greater efficiency, or more effective integration into the university curriculum (or even just to better insulate both from the destructive consequences of the ongoing transformation of English into something other than a humanistic discipline) might be the one that could (should?) have been made to the curricular establishment of literature and of writing instruction when supporters of each were still seeking academic respectability: not that they came unaccompanied by academically acceptable methods of pedagogy and research sufficient to make them plausibly successful additions to the university, but that the very attempt to develop such methods could only lead to the elevation of the methods themselves—and the inevitable disputes over their saliency—to the status of paramount object of disciplinary attention. By all laws of academic logic, the diminution of literature was all but inevitable, and it is entirely reasonable to question whether any kind of continued association with academe is in the best interest of those who wish to ensure a relevant future for serious imaginative and critical writing.

There is no reason to assume that the efforts made over the course of the last century to include both literature and creative writing in the university curriculum were at all carried out in bad faith. Although professional aggrandizement and academic politics inevitably played some role, the relocation of the literary world’s center of gravity to the

university was by and large a well-intentioned attempt to enhance the status and prestige of literary writing. But at best the endeavor has produced unintended and self-defeating consequences, and at worst it has ultimately failed outright. English has essentially reverted to the approach one associated with philology—using literature for its convenience as a means of investigating historical and cultural matters—and in whatever direction this discipline moves under the auspices of the corporatized university, it is unlikely to veer so sharply as to once again invest its resources in the creation and support of an academic literary culture. Under the circumstances, simply to hope that the university becomes a more comfortable place for those inclined to take literature seriously on its own terms would be foolish indeed.

Among the harmful consequences of in effect granting custody of literature to the academy, moreover, has been the all but total disappearance of literary criticism in anything other than its most theory-laden mode, published in the most inaccessible and little-read scholarly journals. Although the proliferation of creative writing programs over the past forty years has been accompanied by an equally impressive increase in numbers of “little magazines” offering new poetry and fiction, by and large these journals have restricted themselves to publishing creative writing and have not performed the useful function they might of contesting the domination of academic criticism by also including intelligent, text-based criticism relevant to a non-specialized literary audience and consistent with their ultimate goal of finding such an audience for contemporary writing. Nor have newspapers, book reviews, or other outlets for literary journalism stepped in to fill a void opened up by the usurpation of the independent critic’s role by the literature professor. When not in fact penned by professors putting the occasional public face on their activities, the essays and reviews appearing in these venues, with notable exceptions, are usually glib and superficial, more often than not no more than plot summaries and idle gossip laced with “attitude,” or “edge.” (Unfortunately, “literary” websites on the Internet have so far proven to be particularly inclined toward this style of facile chatter; whether serious writing of any kind can ever truly find a home in the cyberworld is perhaps still an open question, but there seems little in the technology itself that would make it an especially felicitous medium, experiments in “hypertext” notwithstanding, for either fiction and poetry or literary criticism of any sustained kind,

all of which are irretrievably committed to the material arrangements of the written word.)

Finally even those, like myself, who think that radical solution such as the one I have proposed would be necessary to sustain a place for literature in the academy, confront a difficult choice. To the extent that maintaining a presence for it in the university curriculum helps to provide literature with a certain cultural standing or promises to educate new readers—perhaps even to attract new readers who might otherwise be lost—then working to secure that presence seems worthwhile, even obligatory. But to the extent that this would continue to encourage a perception that literature is primarily a subject of academic study it can actually limit the attention paid to contemporary writing, not least because this perception inhibits the development of the opportunities for critical scrutiny and debate all writing that aspires to the status of literature requires (and deserves). Certainly at its present level of popularity on most campuses, creative writing would be safe in something like its current incarnation for the immediate future, but in the absence of literary criticism that can in any way live up to its ample inheritance, or of pedagogical practices that take advantage of criticism’s insights to help create a suitable audience for literary writing, who can say that what both D. W. Fenza and David Radavich really fear the most—the trivialization of literature, through the imposition of either unsuitable professional or corporate standards—won’t eventually come to pass?

Meanwhile it is not entirely unwarranted to feel that such trivialization is already well under way, especially in the curriculum and the professional discourse of traditional literary study. Likewise, it is not unreasonably alarmist to fear that creative writing programs, where regard for the work undertaken by literature still prevails, will inevitably suffer from a continued dependence, however informal, on what remains of the English department. Perhaps if nothing else, a revival of nonacademic criticism could help revitalize a literary culture outside the university thoroughly enough to enable writers and critics to separate themselves—psychologically, if not at first literally—from the now tangled groves of academe. Indeed, the most important task that literary criticism could perform right now might be to encourage and justify this separation by reminding us all that the literary and the academic are not synonymous and by redefining “creative

writing” as an ongoing artistic project of abiding cultural importance, a collective project that takes inspiration where it can from what has come before but that otherwise, through the achievements of those presently working at it, provides the measure of what we understand “literature” to be. No additional seal of approval from academe would be required.