Drawing Breath: Creative Elements and their Exile from Higher Education

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Abstract

We are all creative now. Where once creativity was thought to be the preserve of the Arts and Humanities, we now find creativity has become a ubiquitous aim of higher education in the twenty first century. Our ills will be resolved as long as we can release our latent creativity and perform. The discourse of higher education strategic management now sees an apparent paradoxical coupling of notions such as creativity, performance, blue skies with targets, outputs and productivity. In the midst of such active creativity-making it is worth asking ourselves some basic questions regarding the nature, purpose and desirability of such forms of creativity. Who is served by the renewal of a discourse of creativity? Does it exist in practice? How do we know it when we see it? Is it good? Where and how might it happen? In this paper Alison Phipps returns

to some early stories and myths of creativity from the Arts and Humanities and considers the elements of fire, water, earth and especially air and their symbolic status in sourcing creativity. In order to offer counter-stories to those which may chock the flourishing of learning she draws on alternative metaphors, parables and imagery and considers the kinds of futures which may be worth creating. These elements provide understandings of creativity as resourcing life, ordering the myths of human endeavour and education. This paper draws on work Heidegger, Irigarary, Carson, Ingold, Brueggemann and Barnett. In particular it considers work of anthropology, poetry and theology which offer singular, disciplined perspectives on the possibilities for creativity and the heavy, determined work which accompanies its apparent ease and flow.

I am beset on every side.

Committed academics to my Right

And to my Left.

Behind, the grey years of the profession.

Ahead, I hear the helpless cries of students

For more entertainment and better results.

(Keith Warnock)

Critical Thinking on Critical Thinking

Lets go back to the start: Critical thinking and the future of the universities was the task of the Galway Symposium. The literature on critical thinking and criticality in higher education is substantial. A search of *Arts and Humanities in Higher* Education alone produces 136 keyword hits to date. Other Higher Education journals providing a similar response. Critical thinking is embedded into benchmark statements and learning aims and outcomes across the board in the

arts, humanities and social sciences in higher education. It is what we do. There is even a meta-literature, of which what follows offers further contribution, where higher education researchers are critical of the critical (Barnett 1997;Creme 1999;Evans 2004;Giroux 2008;Guilherme 2002;McLaren 1995;Walker 2002). It is the place we ask ourselves: Where has the critical paradigm got us in imagining different futures for higher education? How has critical thinking, critical being, criticality, critical argument – all now staples of the critical discourse in higher education – helped create critical citizens.

Perhaps it has got us somewhere? Our common sense assumptions are now critiqued. We know how to critique and we have a language to critique with. Our ability to relativise has been enhanced. We no longer only assume a stance from one place in the world thanks to the critical work of cultural studies on gender, race, language and class. Power is questioned and questioned often radically and well. The postcolonial university and its scholars have taught us well what the critical gains can be from critical pedagogy in particular (Freire 1970;Freire 1982;Freire 1998;Freire 2006) Subjectivity is not taken for granted as a world view and when it is there is a discourse and literature and tradition from which it may be challenged and defended, especially from feminism (Irigarary 1994). At the heart of higher education we have mission statements which point to an embrace of tolerance and equality – those wonderful touchstones of liberal democracy as the ideological goals of the critical paradigm. And within that at the moment in education we see the idea of citizenship being rediscovered as a way of being critical in the postmodern and postcolonial world (Guilherme 2002). So maybe the critical paradigm of critical thinking has got us somewhere.

Or perhaps it has got us no where. Paulo Freire spoke of the verbalism – the speaking back to power – and activism – the being actively against injustice – coming together and needing to work together so that neither were hollow in what he called praxis (Freire 1970;Freire 2006). Yet often we have a verbalism without activism and an activism without verbalism. We see a

paralysis in the face of what Barnett (Barnett 2000) calls 'supercomplexity'. This refers not just to the complexity of lives but the impossible complexity of lives where to do one thing will trigger off other things that cannot ever be solved just by the application of money and resource. We see a world where intercultural C.Vs become fetish objects in the global markets (Pourhashemi 2005) and where students are encouraged to collect intercultural experience in order to earn high salaries.

Consumption, evasion, even disposal of the idea of citizenship is the flip side to the citizenship agenda in practice, where the cynical expression of a refusal to vote becomes a norm, even fashionable. The suffragettes of my great grandmother Barnes's generation are turning in their graves because our students, often first time voters, are not voting, not engaging in the primary rituals of citizenship. And then there are the newly insecure middles classes. Those who have known securely where they stood in the world and now no longer where they stand or what the future holds. All of it leading – perhaps through the critical paradigm – to a sense of disengagement. Because of course we can see *critically* what is wrong with NGOs, we can see *critically* what might not be quite perfect in 'Making Poverty History' and if we look hard enough *critically* then we can find vested interests anywhere. That then gets us off the hook, because we can see it and criticize it and therefore we do not need to try, through stumbling and error, to engage in the actual activities which would count as critical action.

Allied to this is the higher education version of the consumer ideology of and the demands of the 'Risk Society'; what Ulrich Beck (Beck 1986) refers to as the place where we manufacture and consume risks in order to try and give ourselves a sense of control over the world. Small risks, risks which will take us away from the real risks which face us on a planet, where unless we radically change our standards of living millions will die.

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So, perhaps there are limits to the Critical Paradigm. This is certainly born out by the meta-critical literature on critical thinking. Over ten years ago Barnett suggested that:

> The idea of critical thinking as the defining concept of higher education has to give way to a much larger idea of critical being, in which critical reason is but one of the forms of being together with critical self-reflection and critical action. (Barnett 1997: 171)

In 2000 in Liquid Modernity Bauman spoke of 'the critical impasse.'

> The point is, however, that contemporary society has given to the 'hospitality of critique' an entirely new sense and has invented a way to accommodate critical thought and action while remaining immune to the consequences of that accommodation, and so emerging unaffected and unscathed – reinforced rather than weakened – from the tests and trials of this open house policy. (Bauman 2000: 23)

And then Kenneth White, in his essay *The Nomadic Intellect* maintains that:

> Criticist discourse tends to become a process in itself, integrated into the system. The result is a vast accumulation of studies and statistics that give the impression of being valid and up-to-date, but get nobody anywhere and tend to simply clutter up the space for manoeuvring. (White 2004)

But despite all of this and my respect for these powerful thinkers I still want higher education to be an occasion and an institution where I, my colleagues and most of all my students can learn to think, and to think critically.

Critical Thinking about Creative Thinking

So much for critical thinking and the future of the universities. What about the creative paradigm? Creativity is the exciting new paradigm. A call for participants went out from the UK funding councils "to take part in a five-day sandpit to look for innovative ways to explore the new dynamics of aging is now open." Five minutes each to present 2 slides on research and ideas. Speed dating for would-be academic grant holders. A sandpit: The return of the discourse of creativity in nursery education to the higher education. In many ways this may be no bad thing;

a re-embodiment of learning; a focus on the importance of ludic learning. Such a shift is one that many feminist academics have called for, for a long time, away from the insistence on learning as a disembodied cognitive good towards an enfleshed, sensuous education. Except, of course, that there is never a single grain of sand in the new metaphorical sandpits of abundant creativity. Just more power point and more death by dot. In sandpits: 2 slides and 5 minutes are all it takes to make us into creative people. No time for careful practice, skilful discernment, years of error and reflection or the solidity of groups which have histories of creative work.

Discursively, the term critical thinking is being replaced by creative thinking. The new *Curriculum for Excellence* for schools in Scotland identifies four attributes for its learners and one of them is as follows: "Successful learners think creatively and independently." (2009). What this attribute epitomizes is the individualizing of learning; - no longer a social activity, but an individual, independent endeavour; the abolition of criticality, of critical thinking and critical being; and the absolutizing of success, which is narrowly and mostly economically defined. A large amount of collective, creative work will have been part of the construction of the attribute, through conferences, policy discussion and committees. The new 'creativity' emerges here as a part of the all pervasive neoliberal managerialism. It is efficient and cheap, its lean and mean and it reflects neither critically nor creatively on the dominant assumption that powers the rich world: that economic growth is necessary for any kind of well being. This is the wealth-creative assumption which has replaced the older idea of the redistribution of wealth and the narrowing of the poverty gap. This creativity is new – with all the attendant the fetish of the new – and it gets reduced to mindmaps, brainstorming sessions and now also sandpits.

Barbara Mistal in her study of creativity in higher education says:

> Organisations, empowered by technologies and aiming to become creative organisations, increasingly rely on 'creativity' as a buzzword to provide remedy for the future. (Misztal 2007: 48)

As long as we repeat the word 'creativity' enough we, so it goes, will all be creative and therefore also rich, goes the thinking. 'Quality' said Barnett (Barnett 1992) 'is an empty word filled with discourses which reflect competing and incompatible ideologies of quality.' I would suggest that we are at the point in discursive shifts in the landscape of higher education where we can replace the word 'quality' in Barnett's study, with the word 'creativity' and it would read the same. It too is becoming 'an empty word, filled with discourses which reflect competing and incompatible ideologies of [creativity].'

'Creative' teaching like 'creative' research– because everything under such shifting discursive and ideological paradigms also has to collocate with 'creative' – takes us beyond ethics, where as Gonzalez says:

> We are asked to provide a liberal supply of chisels, hammers, planes, nails and spirit levels – but we have nothing to say about the building of the ship, no role in determining the ethics of creating nuclear submarines or the desirability of luxury cruise liners.
> (Phipps & Gonzalez 2004: 92)

Creativity takes us into a realm beyond ethics and beyond the criticality discussed above. It flatters to deceive for we all want now to be described as creative types and to be part of the creative ideology. 'Ideology is around to make us feel necessary [creative]; philosophy is on hand to remind us we are not.' (Eagleton 2003: 212)

Decreation: A Contemporary Parable

There was once a woman. She was intelligent, strong, courageous and conscientious and she was beautiful. She had a vision of the university as a place where life and learning and love could flourish. Indeed, it had been her long struggle and experience that this is not a false hope but a reality forever surprising her, coming in to being and filling her with life. Her students took delight in her courses. She took delight in their learning. The managers of the University saw her considerable creative potential and gave her their work to do. She would do it well, and with

energy, they knew. For many months she struggled, gradually ceasing to be surrounded by the excitement and discovery and questioning of students and instead caged; whipped by urgent trivia, email, and the insatiable demands of bureaucracy and review. Every task was burdened by the politics of systemic managerial distrust. She asked repeatedly for help and support. This was greeted with the silence of ever busier management and a budget freeze. She grew pale and thin. Where she had once delighted in physical strength, boundless energy, peaceful sleep she became plagued by illness, tiredness and insomnia.. Instead of walking delightedly into work with a spring in her step she would often be in tears before leaving the house. As more work piled onto her desk she would already be apologizing, forever saying 'no' to all the things which had otherwise filled her with life. The child she was carrying she lost

This is not destruction. This is what Simone Weil and Anne Carson term *decreation* (Carson 2006;Weil 1997). This is the known place of desire, where one is left when once known creative elements depart. No longer is our woman fired up, high octane, a bight light, rooted, fresh and flowing, teeming with life. Where only a year previously she had been oxygen, high octane, sailing the skies on pedagogy's breath, now she was falling, starved of air, suffocating. Undone, unethered from the elements that give life.

This is the human reality of the exhausting script that dominates our society. It is the script that Walter Brueggemann terms "' script of technological, therapeutic, consumer militarism that socializes us all.' (Brueggemann 2007: 192). Brueggemann goes on to say that stories such as this one of our woman, show the extent to which this script has failed. It cannot make it safe and it cannot make us happy.

I see her learning to contain her own pain; not denying it or pretending it doesn't hurt or keeping a stiff upper lip; not locking it away in a hidden place where it can fester and poison and smolder into resentful combustion. This containment is a holding, a bearing, a carrying. It is a letting the

pain be pain. It is the exact meaning of the word passion, allowing or suffering experience. It is not virtuous, or noble or pious. It hurts like hell. And yet I see in the containment of this passion is the seedbed, the very ground of creativity, of new life. (Galloway 1994: 22)

The public expression of pain, tragedy in its ritual forms, works on social patterns through symbol and action as does critical reflection through thought and rhetoric. It moves for change (Turner 1982) through liminoid process in late modern societies, be this on a theatrical stage, in an extract of a story, from liturgical speech or in the critical ritual of the annual undergraduate degree examination diet. It points to inadequacies in social arrangements. The expression of pain in the story of our woman, here, points to the inadequacy in our critical thinking arrangements and discourse in higher education at this present time. So I wish to suggest that we need grander narratives than the fragmented small, partial local narratives we have been taught to practice for so long through postmodernism and post structuralism. I'd like to suggest that it may be the task of the university to de-script, to help us relinquish dead scripts, scripts with a death wish, and to offer alternative stories. I'd like to suggest that there ought to be more dancing. I believe we need some of the elements that we have exiled from the arts and humanities: We need exiled elements to think with again like Death, Politics, Truth, Beauty, like understanding something of the important idea of God, metaphysics, Love, Vulnerability, the centrality and even celebration of error, and rest. These are some of our exiled elements in higher education, aspects of discourse which have ceded their place under furious attack to less worthy ideals: 'agendas, impacts, targets, outcomes, employability, roll outs, measurable, metrics.'

Exiled Elements

The exile from critical practice and from the time and history involved in creative endeavour of any kind is also an exile from a language of learning, well expressed by Mary Evans in her critique of the contemporary university:

> An initial resistance, which might attract great popular support, and have important beneficial consequences, could be a refusal of the language now inflicted upon university staff. Out would go consumers, mission statements, aims and objective and all the widely loathed, and derided, vocabulary of the contemporary university. (Evans 2004: 74)

Under such conditions we might do well to ask ourselves what it is that exiles do to keep alive their language and history and cherished ways of life so that we may learn again from such experience.

Firstly, exiles grieve for what they have lost. They lament publicly expressing pain and honest sadness. Secondly, exiles also engage in comedy, ridiculing established power. The arts and humanities have long had ways of 'transferring knowledge' through tragedy and comedy. Thirdly, exiles think and act critically. They are very careful about being too cosy with 'Empire' i.e. with whoever or whatever has colonized their imaginations. They are very careful with 'Empire's' language and tackle the dominant, failing script as they experience it from their places of pain, with words of their own, with, old words, odd words, with poetic words (Phipps and Saunders forthcoming 2009)

Exiles engage in elemental memories. They remember the old ways, old names, odd ways, odd names in order to re-imagine the future. They do this nostalgically. Nostalgia is often used as a pseudo-critically as a short had for people or practices which are somehow stuck in the past and not of the 'real world'. Followng Tannock, however, I believe we need a certain degree of edgy-romanticism when working to recover exiled elements in higher education. Nostalgia, according to Tannock (Tannock 1995), is a critical resource for enabling us to better understand our present circumstances in the light of things we may have lost, or may have had taken from us. Its roots are in a nineteenth century neologism meaning pain and longing for home.

Exiles need metaphor, parable, story. Such stories help exiles orient themselves to other discourses than those that colonize our imaginations, and they give alternative stories to live by and to give a sense of movement, possibility, a grander narrative than the status quo: hope.

> Metaphorical language [...] is the method of human movement it insists on taking along the whole human being in all its familiarity, messiness, and concreteness. Metaphor is, for human beings, what instinctual groping is for the rest of the universe – the power of getting from here to there. (Mcfague 1975)

For me this means looking to creative elements in the arts and humanities, in theology and anthropology in particular. In concrete terms, following Mcfague, creative elements are elements of air, water, earth, fire and light. If we look at the founding stories and myths in Ancient Greek and Hebrew we find the *Stoichea* – the elements – were what came to light in when the advent of writing brought those elements of created life into sharp relief and in stories that have endured: Icharus; the Burning Bush; The Flood; Orpheus; Fire thieves; Dry bones; a Fiery Furnace. Using such creative, generative elements of life as the concrete basis for metaphorical thinking I try and imagine what elemental pedagogies might look like for us, using these elements as a basis for our educational practices. This is not so we can do what we have been doing for the last 300 years and saying to the elements "give us unimaginable power so that we might dominant the world with nuclear weapons and by splitting the atom", but rather how might we learn from the earth and the air, from fire and light, and water? What do these elements teach us so that perhaps, in the face of climate change and with all the difficulties of environmental justice we might have a chance of being attentive; not just caring for one another but also for the earth? That is why I believe we need to recover our exiled element, as a concretely metaphorical endeavour to aid our critical thinking and creative practice of grander narratives in higher education.

In particular I have been caught by the physical properties and metaphorical potency of the element of air. The future of Universities will depend on re-en*chant*ment – the different

patterned, structured uses of air to say words which are not the flattened consonants and unmemorable vowels of management-speak; It will depend on in*voca*tion – invoking and evoking of other possible worlds. It will require in*spir*ation. Students want to be inspired and know when they are, they know the feeling of energy that such oxygen brings. It will therefore depend on us – in our universities, having breath, air, wind, spirit.

Drawing Breath

In his most recent book Barnett speaks of a pedagogy for inspiration and a pedagogy of air:

> There is not just air, but different kinds of air, and thought of the kind appropriate to higher education requires air, and new air at that, indeed fresh air. (Barnett 2007: 116)

This is not new. If we go back to creation stories across the anthropological record we find air, breath and wind at the source of stories of our genesis. In Genesis Ruach – breath, wind, spirit: the first bringer of life:

> First this – heaven- earth – all you see all you don't see – black inkiness - and then creative power – God – brooding like a bird over the abyss. Ruach.

And then the Ruach, a word we have to physically create with more air than we need for any other word in language. Ruach – that speaking out and producing of air to give to others and exchange with others (Abram 1997).

We need to lament the lack of air in higher education; we need to think with and for the air and its properties; we need to remember the air in higher education (Abram 1997). If we do so we might be lamenting the bureaucratic control, and suffocation, the urgency of email, forms in place of form, diarized days which daze, endless assessments, reviews which signal the end of trust, the sanitizing and the ugliness of a hot-house policy for higher education. These may be things to lament and the air is an element to recover in physical and metaphorical form.

Luce Irigarary asks 'of what does thought consist? Of air' and 'does thought need an other air than the living do? More ethereal?' (Irigarary 1983: 13).

We breathe out and in. Rest. This is where the wisdom of the sabbatical comes from in higher education. That time, like Sabbath time, Shabbath, common to world religions, when we stop, lay down our work, break the endless cycles of production, slow down our rates of breathing, discover a calm and even become becalmed. Those times when we are adrift, losing our bearings, unsure as to how to make progress, times when we are stuck are often times with creative potential because of the longing we know of to move and fly again. Elaine Scarry says air comes to us in a rush when we encounter beauty (Scarry 2001). It is a greeting, a gasp of wonder at truth, beauty, discovery, a place beyond cynicism for enchantment.

Decreated Universities

We have been experiencing the decreation of the universities:

> "To misstate, or even merely understate, the relation of the universities to beauty is one kind of error that can be made. A university is among the precious things that can be destroyed" (Scarry 2001: 8)

In decreated universities such as those we experience now the challenges are not epistemological. We already know, and painfully, our exhausted situation. We know it painfully in our bodies and in the lives of those we work alongside. The challenges are metaphysical: ethics, being, death, non-being, beauty, trust; and metaphorical: air, inspiration, enchantment, exhilaration, rest, freshness, movement. So, for critical thinking to flourish in the future university I suggest we imagine what happens when the air is our teacher? As metaphor, as physical property sustaining life, and as movement.

When decreated exiles long for change it can seem a wearisome, futile task and is the subject of much ridicule in and of itself. However, in concluding I do not suggest that this is complex or even supercomplex Herculean task for the strong, heroic or super-intelligent, but rather that this is quite simple and as old as the hills. It rest in insisting on our own peculiar practices, worked

out by generations of teachers and scholars. It consists in reading (books), thinking, talking and listening (breathing in and out); in writing, resting, celebrating, contesting, in 'airing' ideas. 'Mental life is porous, open to air and light' (Merleau-Ponty 2002). And so, against the erosion of air and space, the future university, as an aired university, might re-commit to blue skies thinking in the pattern of a spacious, gracious commitment to embodied critical, creative elemental practice.

I think that it is the silence I miss most,
and the press of words which are not friends.
I dislike the bullets, the hierarchy, the numbering down from top to bottom,
with closed bracket, and colon and dot.
I dislike the roman numerals which tell of imperial strength,
decimated,
shot.

I fear snatch and grab raids on my shores,
the demand that I kneel and speak this coarse and confident tongue.
The demand that I be sure.
Imperatives silencing my word-martyred self.

I fear rape from the shrill and penetrating sounds.

I fear the stone in the sling of my angry blood.

I miss too the ebb and the flow,
the ringing bell of punctuation which opens
brackets and then closes
them again. (Brackets, I know, can be
exciting, can enclose
a smile,
a lover's kiss,
the gentlest eye lid's wink)

like this

[...]

and this

(...)

and this

{...}

Space at last for a crack
to open in the words
when they press.
A chink of light,
of welcome,
of the warmth
of a resting house.
Space to be unsure. to breathe in

(...)

and out

(...)

Space to listen.

Full stop.

And then to speak.

Space to break.

Bread.

A nourishing table heavy
with good words.

A square meal [...] squared off.

Oh how I am drawn to the tideline.

There are bright stones,
the seeds of prayer,
waiting for me to sow them,
to cast them arcing into the green air,
to grow them
in the tide again.

Policies change.

I finger the sea stone.

May silence lengthen.

{... ...}

May hierarchy curve. (...)

May we seedcorn policy by pouring air into words.

May we undo what does not serve.

(AP forthcoming 2009)

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