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CREATIVITY

*Matthew Kieran***Characterizing Literary Creativity**

What is literary creativity? Philosophical and literary tradition holds that the following two conditions must be met: novelty and value. There is, unsurprisingly, a large amount of controversy about just how both conditions should be spelt out. Nonetheless, there is a surprising amount of agreement that both conditions are required (Attridge 2004, Boden 2004, Carroll 2003, Gaut 2003, O'Quin and Besemer 1999, Stokes 2008). Novelty is necessarily a relational term, being a matter of newness with respect to something that has gone before, whilst (literary) value is at least partly relational, concerning how we appreciate and value literature.

It might seem as if the conjunction of the novelty and value conditions yields what it is for a work to be original. Yet we should be careful not to define creativity in terms of originality, given that writers can be creative without being original. Whilst originality may be a high-end creative achievement, literary creativity does not as such entail originality. Many novels or poems might not be particularly original – consider much genre fiction – and writers sometimes plagiarize or pastiche for literary effect. It is helpful here to distinguish between psychological and historical creativity (Boden 2004). Psychological creativity, Boden argues, is a matter of coming up with something valuable that is 'new to the person who comes up with it' (Boden 2010: 30). Hence we can judge a writing student's poem to be psychologically creative without thereby being committed to any claim about originality. Historical creativity, Boden suggests, is psychological creativity that stands in a special relation to what else has been done: it is a matter of coming up with something that is valuable, new to the person who comes up with it *and* has never been thought or done by anyone before, i.e. 'has arisen for the first time in human history' (Boden 2010: 30).

The distinction between psychological and historical creativity is stark and perhaps overly demanding in the latter case. We might more profitably conceive of Boden's distinction as two ends of a spectrum along which judgements of creativity exhibit a huge amount of context sensitivity and degree (Meskin unpublished manuscript). What is judged to be creative when comparing first-year creative writing students is rather different from what is required to be creative, inventive or even original for an already established literary author. Even in the case of established authors what standards and background comparators are appealed to in ascriptions of creativity will depend upon the relevant context. In a crime fiction review it might plausibly be claimed that James Ellroy is one of the most original contemporary writers – assuming the comparison class is that of crime fiction – and yet elsewhere it may be right not to put him in the same class as writers such as Philip Roth, Margaret Atwood, or J. M. Coetzee.

More controversially the presumption that novelty is required for a work to be creative might be setting the bar too high, at least where novelty is supposed to be a significant, substantial, non-trivial condition. To create in the most minimal sense just is to bring something into existence and we can be more or less creative with respect to how we do so. Imagine clicking the mouse on a computer that runs a software program (let us call it 'Author Author') resulting in the printer churning out a poem. Even if the poem is a decent one, it is not a particularly creative way to write one (at least *you* are not specially creative in doing so given you only clicked the mouse and ran the program). By contrast an author may sit down and skillfully bring about different variations on the same kind of imaginative poem or romance novel time and time again. Writers can be creative in a minimal sense just in virtue of the skillful, imaginative ways in which they write what they do, even where this does not involve doing anything significantly or saliently new. Angela Thirkell, to take one example, set many of her novels in Anthony Trollope's fictional county of *Barssetshire* and lifted names, characters, plots, and devices from other writers such as Gaskell, Dickens and Galsworthy. In some respects Thirkell's novels are not hugely dissimilar to contemporary fan fiction, where literary enthusiasts write stories in the same fictional universe created by their favoured authors – Tolkien's Middle Earth for example – or using characters from works they admire – Darcy from Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. More conventionally works in standard genre fiction such as romance, chick lit, horror, science fiction, crime, or fantasy are often not particularly novel in any interesting sense. This is part of what is taken to characterize something as mere genre fiction as opposed to literary fiction. Nonetheless this does not show that genre writing is uncreative *tout court*. A work of standard genre fiction may well not be as creative as other more literary works (though this is not necessarily the case) and we may often value the uniqueness, novelty, and originality in literary fiction much more than we value the skillful, imaginative realization of genre fiction. Yet we should be careful to avoid constitutively defining creativity as such in terms of the kind of substantial novelty or originality we most value in literary fiction.

Literary creativity is not just a matter of end product or outcome success. As we have just seen, creativity is also a matter of how something came about. Running the computer program 'Author Author' is one thing, sitting down to write a story yourself or with others is another. The person or group involved must be responsible for the relevantly surprising, novel, or valuable features of the work in the right kind of ways. Consider a thought experiment inspired by Borel's infinite monkey theorem. Borel's hypothesis holds that a monkey hitting typewriter keys for an infinite length of time would almost surely produce – amongst an infinite range of rubbish and other works – the complete works of Shakespeare. Presumably the monkey would also produce novel, valuable works, the like of which had not been read before. Yet we would not thereby hold that the monkey is creative in any deep or interesting sense. The monkey has made something that is historically novel and valuable in literary terms (along with mostly rubbish nonsense). Nonetheless the relation between what the monkey is doing, randomly hitting typewriter keys, and why, maybe hitting typewriter keys is fun, is entirely accidental to the production of literary masterpieces. In literary terms the monkey has no idea what it is doing. Attributing creativity to an agent presumes that there is a non-accidental relation between what someone is doing, the intentional description under which the act is performed, why, and the nature of the end result (Stokes 2008, Gaut 2009, Kieran 2014a). Creativity thus involves something like

a relevant purpose (in not being purely accidental), some degree of understanding (not using purely mechanical search procedures), a degree of judgement (in how to apply a rule, if a rule is involved) and an evaluative ability directed to the task at hand.

(Gaut 2010: 1040)

This is not to claim that creativity requires a writer to know or plan absolutely everything beforehand. Writers sometimes only have a pretty vague aim in view or start from the most minimal images, associations, or phrases in committing pen to paper. What matters is that the author's agency is exercised in making the relevant literary choices and giving form to the work. This is consistent with the recognition that writers often experiment by introducing accidental or non-conscious elements into the creative process (Gaut 2010). Whilst cases vary, what renders the use of accidental or non-conscious elements praiseworthy aspects of a writer's creative process – as opposed to mere serendipity – will depend upon a variety of factors including (a) the author's willingness to use or experiment with such elements for literary reasons, and/or (b) doing so in a manner that draws upon automated processes related to the author's literary expertise, and/or (c) requires the author's expertise in appraising the results and making use of them in interesting and valuable ways.

Types of Creativity, Canonicity and Traditions

Literary creativity is a function of the agential processes that bring the text about, the literary values realized in or through the text and the relations in which the resultant work stands to other literary works. Adopting Boden's (2004; 2010) tripartite taxonomy of kinds of creativity to literature would give us the following:

1. *Combinatorial creativity*. This kind of creativity involves the unfamiliar recombination of familiar ideas and devices. George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, for instance, draws on a host of familiar concepts about politics, human beings and animal behaviour to recombine them in unfamiliar ways in the service of standard allegorical ends.
2. *Exploratory creativity*. This amounts to exploring the conceptual spaces of the structured style of thought being worked within. In literary terms this would include developing some of the possibilities foreshadowed by other works or authors or better realizing the literary potential and effects implicit in a given literary style, genre, form, or structure. Moliere's comedies, for example, refined pre-existing conventions in comedies of manners to explore dramatic characterization for satirical ends.
3. *Transformational creativity*. The transformation of conceptual space and literary devices such that someone ends up writing a work that could not have been written prior to such a transformation. Thus, for example, the introduction of the epistolary novel in the seventeenth century or stream-of-consciousness writing in the early twentieth century gave rise to radically new literary possibilities that subsequent novels went on to exploit. Rather than explore the potentiality of previous forms and conventions, the transformative creativity of writers such as Samuel Richardson or James Joyce, respectively (amongst others), gave rise to new literary forms.

Boden's basic categorization is open to challenge or refinement. Novitz (1999), for example, argues that transformations of conceptual space need not amount to radical creativity. Alternatively, if creativity need not require significant novelty, we may need a category that is more modest than either combinatorial or exploratory creativity to capture the ways in which works can be modestly creative just in virtue of the skillful, imaginative realization of the same kind of work over and over again (as is sometimes found in mere genre fiction). Challenges such as these may point toward the need for a richer basic taxonomy. Carroll (2003), for example, outlines five basic types of creativity which may be articulated in relation to literature as follows: (1) repetition with variation, either with respect to literary structures or themes found in previous traditions; (2) hybridization, where a literary work yokes together two or more elements from distinct styles, genres, or traditions; (3) interanimation, which involves bringing devices, strategies, or values from one art form into another; (4) amplification, which is a matter of enlarging the nature and resources of a tradition through developing new solutions to enduring problems or projects within that tradition; and (5) revolutionary creativity, which rejects fundamental aspects of literary practice, devices, style, movements, values, or tradition in order to reconfigure literature (though usually this is achieved in part by foregrounding relations to more distant or seemingly foreign traditions).

Whatever the most useful basic taxonomy is, and indeed by which criteria particular works fall under one category rather than another, may partly depend on the uses to which we want to put such categorizations. Nonetheless one striking feature of such taxonomies is the role that relations to other literary works and traditions play. In order to identify whether a work or literary movement is combinatorial, amplificatory, transformative, or revolutionary, we have to know how the relevant work(s) stand in relation to other works and movements.

One way of cashing this out is by appeal to the notions of canonicity and tradition. A 'kanon' in Ancient Greece was a measuring rod and a literary canon (or canons) can be thought of analogously. Literary canons can be thought of as being constituted by the literary classics that pass the test of time (Hume 1993) and afford the touchstones in light of which we appreciate and evaluate literary creativity. Characterizing literary creativity (or the lack of it) partly in terms of the literary canon has a strong explanatory appeal. Authors or critics often characterize the nature and value of even radically transformative literary works in terms that commonly refer to the nature and elements of literary classics. Yet the idea of authoritatively prescribed (and proscribed) works may be problematic. As Olsen (2009) argues, the idea of canonical lists makes sense in theological or legalistic contexts, but by what authority can someone prescribe particular literary works to be central touchstones (or peripheral ones come to that) for literature? There are all kinds of writers and readers from all over the globe and it is far from obvious that particular kinds of readers hold authoritative sway over others. Thus it may be more appropriate to think in terms of canons informed by value and distinct literary traditions. Indeed it may be better, as the poet T. S. Eliot would have us believe (1919), to think that novelty and literary value only make sense in relation to tradition. What matters then, presumably, would be (a) how authors are cultivated into particular traditions in terms of how to write and the devices, genres and forms used; (b) the relations in which newly created works stand to others within and between literary traditions; (c) how traditions develop including reconfigurations and transformations brought about by the new inter-relations brought about by new works amongst the old. Eliot, we might say, conceived of the shock of the new as necessarily the renewal of living literary tradition.

None of this is to claim that literary tradition must be preserved in aspic. Tradition is the starting framework into which writers are typically cultivated – through learning and engaging with the devices, conventions, and structures that work – and which thereby set the initial terms and horizons of creative possibilities. Healthy literary traditions continually remake themselves through engaging with new creative challenges and possibilities in the ways indicated above.

Here we can usefully distinguish between a weaker and a stronger claim with respect to the role of tradition. The strong claim would be that literary creativity requires some kind of relation to tradition (even in radical cases) in order to make sense. This view renders tradition as essential to literary creativity and value. A more modest claim holds that whilst tradition standardly sets the literary terms and framework from which writers work, working within or from some tradition is not as such required for someone to produce a literary work. The weaker thesis has the advantage of making sense of the important role that tradition plays, whilst also recognizing that outsiders can nonetheless produce highly creative literature. The weaker view may have an added advantage in being able to account for how literary traditions themselves must once have got going in terms of the emergence of literary creativity from other non-literary traditions. The stronger view, by contrast, must argue for a theoretical mutual inter-dependence between the notions of literary creativity and tradition (where it would be pointless to ask which ‘got going’ first). Nonetheless both the strong and weak claims seem to be in principle consistent with Virginia Woolf’s bracingly open attitude towards literary creativity:

Let us bear in mind a piece of advice that an eminent Victorian who was once also an eminent pedestrian once gave to walkers: ‘Whenever you see a board up with “Trespassers will be prosecuted”, trespass at once.’

Let us trespass at once. Literature is no one’s private ground; literature is common ground. It is not cut up into nations; there are no wars there. Let us trespass freely and fearlessly and find our own way for ourselves. It is thus that English literature will survive this war and cross the gulf – if commoners and outsiders like ourselves make that country our own country, if we teach ourselves how to read and how to write, how to preserve and how to create.

(Woolf 1940: 181)

Literary Genius and the Sleep of Reason

Perhaps the single most famous origination story of literary creativity is to be found in Coleridge’s preface to *Kubla Khan*. Alone and ill Coleridge describes himself taking a prescribed ‘anodyne’ (a medicinal draft that was most likely opium) causing him to fall asleep whilst reading the following passage from Purchase’s *Pilgrimage*:

Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a wall.

In a deep slumber Coleridge experiences a fantastical dream ‘in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort’ (Coleridge 1816: 52).

Coleridge even says that whilst in the dream he has the sense of composing at least two to three hundred lines and, upon awakening, busily sets to transcribing the poem down. Fatefully, in the midst of writing, someone from Porlock, a nearby town, comes knocking to interrupt him on business. After the visit, Coleridge returns to write only to find that ‘with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream in which a stone has been cast’ (Coleridge 1816: 53).

The end result is the incomplete fragment of fifty-four lines that constitute Coleridge’s most famous poem, opening, as it does, with the lines:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where ALPH, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man

(Coleridge 1816)

Here, in one episode, we have the encapsulation of the Romantic conception of literary genius; one that can be disaggregated into a number of constituent parts with distinct philosophical precedents.

The poem putatively originates from a dream prompted by Coleridge’s reading as he drifted off into sleep, with the unconscious forces of his mind working themselves out from who knows where and partly fuelled by opium. The idea that poetic labours are the result of unconscious irrational or non-rational inspiration reaches as far back as Plato’s *Ion*. Early on in Plato’s dialogue, Socrates compares poets to prophets thus:

For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed. . . . For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and he has no ability to create until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and reason is no longer in him (for absolutely no man, while he retains that faculty, can make poetry or prophesy).

(Plato [380 BC] 2001; 10–11)

Divine muses inspire and possess the poets who are thus mere vessels for the ideas visited upon them. The emphasis on irrational or non-rational aspects of literary creativity, albeit typically in less supernatural form, runs throughout various Western intellectual traditions and can be found one way or another in the work of Nietzsche (1872), Freud (1907), and Koestler (1964) to name but a few. A recurring claim in such authors (though put rather differently) is the idea that unconscious desire, pattern association, or recognition requires the rational, self-conscious editing aspect of the mind to be in abeyance in order to bypass certain mechanisms whether that be repression or self-conscious sense making (see Gaut 2012). Writers sometimes seem to have ideas or images pop up unbidden into the mind’s eye or feel as if the characters in a fiction suddenly start to ‘write themselves’. Moreover, writers sometimes seek out ways of damping down or bypassing rational, conscious thought in order to facilitate inspiration (ranging from processes such as automatic writing, distraction, or ‘sleeping on it’ to using drink and drugs).

There is also a significant body of work that suggests that literary writers (and in particular poets) are more prone to mental illness. Aristotle (or one of his followers,

Theophrastus) observed that the preeminent in poetry and the arts are especially subject to melancholia and contemporary psychology suggests something similar. Jamison (1993) studied forty-seven contemporary writers and found that 38 per cent had undergone significant treatment for mood disorders (i.e. depression). Her analysis of thirty-six major historical poets from 1705 to 1805 revealed a broadly consonant pattern, with thirteen retrospectively diagnosed as probably being bipolar I and six probably bipolar II or cyclothymic. Ludwig's (1995) study of over 1,000 leading cultural figures, including writers, found that 87 per cent of poets, 77 per cent of fiction writers, 51 per cent of social scientists and 28 per cent of natural scientists suffered from some kind of mental disorder. There is much that is controversial about the state of the evidence and, even granting empirical claims, what we should take it to show (Gaut 2012; Kieran 2014b). In virtue of what specific states or mechanisms do such conditions enhance someone's creative capacity? Various possibilities have been suggested ranging from idea generation and ruminative evaluation to mood enhancement effects. And, we might also ask, in virtue of what do such conditions tend to diminish creativity? Depression and anxiety can be crippling conditions for writers as opposed to enhancements.

Whether prompted by depression, sleep, or opium, Coleridge's non-rational inspiration is a fantastical vision which is in turn expressed in literary terms on the page. It is neither particularly clear what the poem means, nor is the poem written in the then standard rhyming iambic pentameter (it is, rather, an admixture of tetrameter and pentameter). The poem's form may not strike us as particularly unconventional today, especially by comparison with free verse, but in Coleridge's time regularity of rhyme and metre were deemed essential to good poetry. It is no surprise then that *Kubla Khan* met with much critical hostility at the time, William Hazlitt, for one, judging *Kubla Khan* to show only that 'Mr. Coleridge can write better nonsense verses than any man in England. . . . it is not a poem, but a musical composition' (2002 [1816]: 208). Here we have the image of Coleridge as the literary genius, ahead of his time and critical contemporaries, experimenting with literary form in the service of a bewitching vision that means we know not quite what.

According to Kant genius is 'the innate mental disposition through which nature gives the rule to (beautiful) art' (Kant: S46). A genius is not just someone who produces something that is valuable as literature or art. Rather the literary genius is one who has a natural talent to go beyond that which can be merely imitated or taught, i.e. beyond mere craft in producing distinctively original works. Genius is not rule bound. Literature and art more generally, unlike science, arise from the harmonious interplay of the writer's imagination and understanding in giving literary form to a work. In science, by contrast, we can, in principle, fully grasp the concepts and attendant chains of reasoning which culminate in discoveries about the natural world. In literature and art more generally, genius creates new associations or concepts but is not determined by them (Kant: S49).

Creativity and the Craft of Literature

A contrasting conception conceives of literary creativity as being akin to a rational craft-like activity. Writing literature, wherever inspiration may come from, is, like many other artistic activities, a process of problem solving. What kind of interest does the writer want to evoke in the central character? Why, if at all, should we care about the central protagonist(s)? What is the best way to explore the literary theme? In some ways Aristotle's *Poetics* can be seen as a kind of recipe book for what writers should aim for in

writing the best kind of tragedy. We may be skeptical of the details of Aristotle's account of ideal tragic structure or more grandiose claims such as Booker's (2004) characterization of the seven most basic plots. Nonetheless, creative writing courses, practising the styles of admired writers or playing with literary conventions of form and genre, have all helped many writers in the course of their creative development.

There may be a tendency to overestimate the role that natural talent plays in literary creativity as opposed to immersion and motivated, deliberate hard work. It is one thing to have an inspired idea for a work, it is quite another to acquire the expertise required to flesh it out into decent literary form. There are several points worth noting here. First, inspiration tends to come to those who have worked intensively in the relevant domain. In other words, writers who work at developing their own literary style or strive to work at writing particular kinds of literature will tend to see certain problems where others do not, pick out what renders something distinctive or generic and set themselves their own particular literary problems. Hence, even unconsciously, those immersed in a domain will tend to be subject to much greater inspiration than those who are not. Second, there is an increasing amount of literature on expert performance across a host of domains which suggests that what matters is how people practise and train in the relevant domains (Bloom 1985; Ericsson 2006). It is not just hard work that is required but also, crucially, a matter of how you work. Striving for literary creativity requires working out where weaknesses lie, what must be improved upon, how automaticity leads to bad habits and so on. Lastly, what matters may not just be a matter of being strongly driven but why. Authors write poems or stories for all sorts of reasons. Yet how and why motivating reasons figure as they do may have a significant effect on an author's creativity.

In one of her early studies Amabile (1985) divided seventy-two creative subjects into three groups. The control group was tasked with writing a snow-themed poem, followed by reading a short story and finally composing a laughter-themed poem. Subjects in the second group were given the same tasks, except that after the short story reading they were also required to rank order intrinsic reasons for writing (such as expression or the joys of word play). The third group was asked to do the same as the second group except that the list of reasons to be ordered were extrinsic ones (such as money, social status, and graduate prospects). The group primed with extrinsic motivating reasons produced the least creative work of the three groups. Indeed, the work the subjects in this third group produced was judged to be significantly worse than that which they had produced for the creative writing course prior to the experiment (as judged by twelve independently successful writers). This is not to claim that extrinsic motivations such as money and status necessarily corrupt literary creativity. However, it may suggest that where such considerations pull apart from literary goals, extrinsic motivation can inhibit or undermine the creative writing process.

No doubt inter-relations between motives and capacities are complex. It could be that creativity is a matter of exercising certain capacities or skills in craft-like ways (Gaut 2009; 2014). Alternatively it might be stressed that the empirical work is consonant with the view that creative excellence consists in possessing certain traits or virtues. The writers we tend to admire as writers are curious, open to experimentation, or willing to take risks and fail. Such traits might be thought as exemplifying or manifesting creative virtues. We also admire and praise where their creativity is driven by intrinsic motivations despite the lack of recognition or commercial reward. On this kind of account literary creativity may be a craft, but to pursue the craft well involves creative virtues (Kieran 2014a; 2014b).

How might such an approach be squared with the evidence concerning the connections adduced above between literary creativity and mental illness? Perhaps there is some reason to be wary about the evidence. It could be that a higher proportion of people who go into the arts have a greater predisposition toward mental illness than normal people. Mental illness and suffering more generally may often be alleviated or made sense of through literary expression. In line with some of the traits mentioned above, literary writers may also be open to riskier experiences or subject to greater frustrations because of what they are trying to achieve. Alternatively, a higher incidence of mental illness amongst creative writers could partly be explained in terms of greater exposure to the kind of frustrating life conditions that trigger or precipitate mental illness. A standard poet will likely typically struggle to get institutional paid employment to fund what they desire to do, whilst a graduating natural scientist will typically go on to be employed by a university or company which provides huge structural and socio-economic support. Those who have structured lives with strong socio-economic support and goods tend to suffer far less from mental illness than those who live in comparative poverty and lack institutional support.

Nonetheless, despite some skepticism, there is significant evidence for interesting links between literary creativity and mental illness. Is this then compatible with the idea that creative excellence is partly a matter of virtue? Or does it fit more neatly with the idea that creativity is a matter of capacity or skill or non-rational? It is worth considering that such claims might be mutually consistent (at least once the claims are refined in appropriate ways). Literary creativity constitutively includes the skills and capacities to produce works which are interesting, surprising, new, or valuable. Literary or creative virtues explain how and why writers often do so in the face of derision, poverty, and indifference (and why we admire and praise them for it).

Creative people tend to score highly for traits such as curiosity, novelty seeking, sensation seeking, challenge seeking, imaginativeness, openness, and unconventionality. Such traits seem at least consonant with a virtue conception of literary creativity. However, there is also much work to suggest that creativity is associated with a host of negative personality or character traits. In general creative people in the arts have been found to be more emotionally unstable, colder, stronger on rejecting group norms, and less conscientious than scientists (Feist 1998). It might thus be claimed that creative excellence in literature is bound up with traits that are morally suspect. Writers can be an ambitious, domineering bunch and such characteristics may help spur them on to ever-greater achievement or renown. Yet all this may show is either (1) that the virtues required for creative excellence are not identical with the virtues required for moral excellence (though there may be some overlap) or (2) the tension may be more apparent than real (Kieran 2014b). Over-inflated self-belief is one thing, well-founded self-assurance quite another. The former may get you some way but only the latter constitutes true creative excellence. It is one thing to be a self-absorbed teenager carried away by flashes of inspiration, it is quite another to work away like Milton.

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