



Challenging Conventional Approaches to Teaching Creative Writing in Italy

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Abstract: *This is an overview of how creative writing is currently taught in Italy and of the reasons why this discipline is struggling to establish itself in public universities. After investigating the relationship between Italian academia and the creative arts, I look at the private nature of these courses in relation to issues of inclusion and diversity; and highlight some of the pedagogical concerns deriving from having imported the anglophone model. Looking at the wider cultural sector, I present some reflections on the Italian book industry as a system which prioritises personal connections over literary value, a process often endorsed by creative writing schools. Lastly, I argue that the introduction of creative writing in Italian academia benefits both writers and universities by providing a more balanced creative-critical approach not only to writing but also to reading and understanding Italian literature.*

Keywords: *Italian creative writing, private schools, research, publishing*

INTRODUCTION

We are living in a golden age of creative writing studies, which seems to suggest that anglophone academia is moving past the historical conflict between creativity and research.

For almost a century Creative Writing degrees have been playing an influential part in moulding contemporary literature, often serving as quality assurance for publishers dealing with a saturated market and effectively acting as gatekeepers of literary value. Creative writing has reached such an established status in anglophone academia that it even has its own 'studies' field. Scholars in creative writing studies are taking an interest in looking at creative writing critically,

identifying alternatives to what is perceived to be the most prominent pedagogy, the ‘workshop method’. Other scholars have identified key issues of power, privilege and identity, documenting the social forces at power inside and outside the creative writing classroom.¹

Creative writing research, however, focus overwhelmingly on English-language writing and degrees, as other academic traditions have only just started or are yet to recognise creative writing as an academic discipline for reasons more complicated than the assumption that writing cannot be taught. This is the case of Italian academia, whose humanities departments have made few sporadic attempts at introducing creative writing workshops and no official degrees exist at postgraduate level.

The lack of official degrees in Creative Writing in Italy has favoured the burgeoning of private non-accredited institutions, such as Scuola Omero in Rome and Scuola Holden in Turin, which have existed since the 1980s and 1990s, respectively. With the exception of a 1997 special issue of literary magazine *Panta* (re-edited by Laura Lepri for Bompiani in 2008), which offered an internal perspective on creative writing in Italy, no extensive study has looked at how creative writing is being taught in non-accredited schools. Lepri’s volume featured some courses that no longer exist; others, such as Scuola Holden, have grown and changed considerably; and countless new courses have been set up in the last twenty years. These vary significantly in length, intensity and in provider, including: creative writing schools, cultural organisations, theatres and others.

Since there are no statistical data available that could provide a sound comparison between how many courses are offered in Italy and how many, for example, in the US, I am focusing here only on creative writing schools offering a structured course of at least one year, with particular reference to: Scuola Holden (Turin), Scuola Omero (Rome), Scuola Mohole and Belleville (Milan) and Bottega Finzioni (Bologna). All writing produced in these courses is in Italian (some of these schools, such as Scuola Holden, do have an international offer; however, this will not be taken into consideration on this occasion).

To contextualise the emergence of creative writing schools in Italy, this study touches on several aspects, each of which could be expanded into a separate article with greater focus and more precise methodology. A broad overview is necessary here to see how connected and interdependent these areas are; and to show how detailed and complex this virtually unchartered field is in a country that does not recognise creative writing as an academic discipline with full rights.

¹ For in-depth analyses and alternatives to the workshop method, see the works of Mark McGurl, Dianne Donnelly, Graeme Harper, Stephanie Vanderslice, Jeri Kroll, Tim Mayers, and Alexandria Peary and Tom Hunley. For more sociological perspectives on issues of power and privilege, and diversity and inclusion, see the works of Anna Leahy, Janelle Adsit and Felicia Rose Chavez.

As well as an extensive study of the literature, I have conducted personal interviews and drawn on my experience as a current student at Scuola Holden, where I am studying on a year-long course featuring a wide range of modules and forms of writing,² comparing my experience with other students on the same course.³ I have also referred to the other schools' websites and open literature for evidence that certain customs and teaching approaches are not unique to Scuola Holden.

I hope this overview will contribute to a body of research exploring this topic and initiate a conversation about creative writing in Italian academia. This essay presents an analysis of why creative writing courses are struggling to establish itself within public universities and of creative writing courses in private institutions. With a sociological and pedagogical focus, I will discuss some of the issues arising from the private nature of schools offering creative writing courses and from the adoption of the anglophone model and the 'workshop method'. Next, I will consider the role of cultural intermediaries in the publishing sector to contextualise some of the tensions derived from applying a pedagogical model based on quality and literary merit in a system which does not seem to be based on the same values. Lastly, I will argue that more research is needed into how creative writing is taught and practised in Italy, and examine how both students of creative writing and universities would benefit from the introduction of creative writing in Italian academia.

1. ITALIAN ACADEMIA AND THE CREATIVE ARTS

To understand why creative writing is not offered at postgraduate level in Italian universities, one needs to look at the wider creative arts sector first. Just as you cannot learn how to write in Italian universities, you cannot learn how to paint, dance, act or play the viola; such studies being restricted to music conservatoires, art academies or drama schools. Some of these institutions have existed for centuries —such as the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence (1530s) and the Accademia di Brera in Milan (1770s)— but their initially craft-focused nature, along with the very different circumstances in which each of these institutions was founded, have made them separate entities from universities.

This has resulted in decades-long debates on how to recognise their qualifications, and to establish whether or not they compare to academic degrees. The process to recognise these institutions as equals to universities took a decisive turn in 1999, when legislative decree 21/12/1999 (n. 508) accomplished two things: first, it created a system gathering individual artistic institutions

² From the *Crazy Original* page of Scuola Holden's website: "We will include a range of different fields, training methods and techniques: from writing to cinema, serials to TV formats, comics to documentaries and from reporting to video games." In this article, I will only be referring to the core subject of my course, "Maestro", a 70-hour fiction writing module led by one mentor.

³ More than 150 students attend *Crazy Original* this academic year (2020-2021). For the core module "Maestro" and some of the workshops, students are divided into 13 classes, each led by a different mentor.

(conservatoires, fine art academies, etc.) into one category, that of *istituzioni d'Alta formazione e specializzazione artistica e musicale* (AFAM), 'institutions for High artistic and musical training and specialization'; secondly, it bestowed on them the status of "autonomous academic institution", effectively recognising their qualifications equivalent to postgraduate academic titles (Brigante 162).

Another twist in the history of creative arts in Italian higher education was the introduction of DAMS (Drama, Arts and Music Studies) degrees in universities, which provide theoretical training in the field of visual arts, cinema, music, theatre and media—the key word here being 'theoretical'. Since their introductions at the University of Bologna in 1971, these programmes have resolved to

train three basic professional figures: cultural operator in various fields involving the management of the artistic, cinematographic and musical heritage; operators working in the design, organisation and management of artistic events and entertainment in the visual arts, cinema, music and theatre; supplier of contents for the cultural industry, publishing, television and multimedia sectors (DAMS).

What these degrees do *not* do, however, is train creative arts practitioners, once again because this is the responsibility of AFAM institutions.

However, there is a notable and rarely referenced exception: literary translation. Literary translation has been taught in Italian universities since the 1980s, following the very first literary translation workshop brought to Italy and co-taught by Frank McShane, head of the writing program of Columbia University and William Weaver, along with a series of guest Italian teachers. Two notable students at this workshop were Linda Lappin, who then won the Pen Poggioli Prize and gained two NEA Fellowships, and became lecturer in English and American language at University La Sapienza in Rome; and Riccardo Duranti, who became a successful author, translator, publisher and professor of English Literature and Literary Translation at La Sapienza.

McShane and Weaver's workshop was hosted by the Centro Studi Americani (Centre for American Studies) in Rome in 1978 and 1979 under the auspices of the Fulbright programme, at the time directed by Cipriana Artom Scelba. "The idea was for young Italian translators to meet with young American translators and critique each other's work in a workshop session," says Lappin (Lappin). One of the most appreciated aspects of the workshop, according to Duranti, was the spirit of community that it created, a novel experience in the solitary labour that was literary translation until then (Duranti).

Duranti went on to introduce literary translation workshops at La Sapienza, and found no resistance from the literary department's director, Prof Agostino Lombardo, who showed "great sensitivity towards literary translation" (Duranti).⁴ He then tried to expand to creative writing, succeeding in publishing a creative writing and literary translation anthology, *Mirafiori Blues*, in 1988.

This was the first of several attempts to establish an explicit relationship between literary translation and creative writing at La Sapienza. However, most of them were hindered by practical problems, such as the absence of a "consistent educational plan" and the scarcity of professors committed to invest their time mostly on a voluntary basis (Duranti).

Since then, other universities have made similar attempts to link creative writing to existing degrees, not only literary translation but also communication studies, semiotics, Italian literature, etc. Some of them have done this in collaboration with creative writing schools, such as that between Scuola Omero and La Sapienza in the 1990s, initiated by Tullio de Mauro, professor emeritus of general linguistics (De Mauro and Lepri 243).

To this day, however, creative writing degrees do not exist in public universities and creative writing can only be studied in private schools. As relatively newcomers, creative writing schools have not been recognised as AFAM institutions, yet, nor have they gained any other form of accreditation, with one exception: in 2019, Scuola Holden introduced a three-year course called *Academy* as an alternative to the school's traditional two-year course (*Original*). According to Scuola Holden's website, at the end of *Academy*, students receive a qualification "comparable to a DAMS undergraduate degree". *Academy's* accreditation was a major step forward in the history of creative writing in Italy. However, Scuola Holden's prohibitive fees make it an option available only to the very few.

2. CREATIVE WRITING IN ITALY

2.1 The private nature of creative writing schools

Creative writing schools not only address the need for focused courses on how to write creatively but they also bestow creative writing with the status of a discipline that can be taught.

Furthermore, their autonomous nature has given them freedom to experiment in a way that would surely be envied by tutors and course convenors of anglophone degrees. Aside from traditional workshops of fiction and storytelling, creative writing students in Italy are given the

⁴ Lombardo was also one of Italy's leading literary translators at the time, as the Italian translator of Shakespeare and Henry James.

opportunity to dip their toes into the waters of digital ethnography and storytelling, intermediality, scriptwriting, copywriting and many other writing forms, choosing whether they want to specialise or adopt a more holistic approach.

Schools also excel at collaborations and community projects: Scuola Holden's project "Fronte del Borgo" regularly organises free workshops and afternoon activities for children in the area, and training opportunities for teachers; Scuola Omero also has a primary and secondary school offer; and both schools are involved in the organisation of important literary festivals. The schools' private nature also allows them to invest money in projects that are less strictly related to creative writing: Scuola Mohole, for example, has a sustainability programme which, along with more ordinary green internal policies, entails planting a tree for each student who enrolls.

However, the private and autonomous character of these schools occasions some concerns of two different kinds: sociological issues of inclusion and diversity and some pedagogical issues.

If you are an Italian 19-year-old who has just finished the *maturità* (secondary school exams) or at any stage of your education wanting to study creative writing full time, your options are very limited; and the first, fundamental question to ask is what you (or your family) can or cannot afford.⁵

For example, a two-year full-time writing course at Scuola Mohole costs €5,900 per year; Belleville's year-long course in fiction and storytelling is €4,750; Bottega Finzioni, which benefits from local government Emilia Romagna's subsidies, offers its very selective 136-hour fiction workshop at €2,000; whereas both *Academy* and *Original* are €10,000 per year, making Scuola Holden Italy's most expensive creative writing school. There are cheaper options, but these are usually offered for evening courses, shorter courses or pay-as-you-go modules, as opposed to a more structured, full-time programme.

Public higher education is much cheaper. Tuition fees are calculated based on a fixed instalment and a second instalment calculated with the ISEE tool, which evaluates a family's economic situation. On average, students of humanities departments spend €140-160 for the first instalment and, depending on their ISEE band, from €300.79 to €2475.79 (Federconsumatori).

At this stage, with the exception of Scuola Holden, most creative writing schools do not advertise their courses as an alternative to university, but rather as specialising courses that anyone can attend. Their fees, however, raise significant financial barriers, therefore excluding young writers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

⁵ Most Italian students either work to support their studies or are financially dependent on their families for both tuition fees and maintenance, since student loans in Italy are not a very common option.

It is worth mentioning that these courses are not only attended by young people. Owing to the high financial barriers, they attract many adult and middle-aged professionals who are taking a break from their established careers to fulfil a lifelong dream once they are able to afford the cost.⁶

This implies that, on one hand, the Italian creative writing classroom suffers from a lack of social diversity and, on the other, is very heterogeneous by age and experience, making it very difficult, if not impossible, to understand for whom these courses are designed. This raises issues in terms of understanding the pedagogical objectives these courses expect their students to achieve and which teaching methods tutors choose to adopt.

2.2 The anglophone model and the workshop method: some pedagogical considerations

Creative writing courses are generally taught by professionals with a demonstrable experience in one or more writing fields (novelists, screenwriters, journalists, experts in digital storytelling, etc.). Only very few of them are also academics. A strong focus on feedback and revision is the most prominent common denominator of these courses, suggesting that the way creative writing is taught in Italy corresponds to what in anglophone academia is known as the ‘workshop method’.

Readers of the *Journal of Creative Writing Studies* might be aware of the ubiquitous questions surrounding the writing workshop, and of the wealth of research that has been published on the subject in the last fifteen years. One of the things that emerges from this research is that there is no unanimously accepted definition of what the workshop method *is*, with the result that the term is applied to several teaching approaches (Cowan, par. 5). In the context of creating writing schools in Italy I use the term ‘workshop method’ to refer to the dominant pedagogy, which draws elements from both what Gaylene Peery called the “hands-on writing workshop” and the “peer-review workshop” (qtd. in Cowan, par. 5).

Given the limited research in the field, my argument with respect to the tendencies (rather than stereotypes) of teaching styles is largely based on my findings from student interviews at Scuola Holden and on my personal experience. Since several tutors at Scuola Holden also teach at Belleville and Bottega Finzioni, it can safely be assumed that in at least three of the most established creative writing institutions in Italy, the same or at least very similar findings apply.

Using a hands-on/generative approach, the tutor prompts students to read texts showing a successful use of specific techniques and skills (character building, writing compelling dialogues, choosing a point of view, etc.) and assigns them writing tasks. For example, one of the exercises

⁶ Unfortunately, the latest available data to offer a demography of creative writing schools dates back to 1997. Nonetheless, it is interesting to look at its results, in which it emerged that 70% of creative writing students were female; 61.5% of total participants had a high school qualification; 30.8% an undergraduate degree; 32% were employees and teachers; and 15% were entrepreneurs or business owners. (Lepri 15)

assigned in my class stemmed from reading Dave Eggers's short story "After I Was Thrown in the River and Before I Drowned". The tutor analysed the text in class and discussed the author's writing of the main character's body and movements in the text, and the task we were asked to complete for the following class was to write a short story where the main character's body and movements had a prominent role (this exercise was called 'Body').

Alternatively, or in a second phase, the tutor encourages students to engage in peer-review activities of their own projects (peer-review/publication-oriented approach). This can be the stage following a generative task (for example, following the 'Body' exercise our class would submit works in advance and hold a class discussion during the following lesson) or it can follow a general fiction writing assignment of a text of a defined length and/or form. For example, the final assignment of our fiction course consisted of writing 10 *cartelle* (a variable length unit used in publishing corresponding to 1800-2000 characters) of fiction, whether self-contained or part of a longer project.

The degree to which one approach or the other is favoured is, unfortunately, entirely dependent on the individual tutor, who is given almost full autonomy to design his or her own method, regardless of the students' levels of experience or their previous knowledge and existing skills.

It is hard to gather in advance not only at whom these courses are aimed (other than those who can afford them), but also to understand how any pedagogical outcomes can be established for a course such as the one I am currently attending, which gathers 13 classes led by 13 tutors. This approach bears more than a passing resemblance to a phenomenon Tim Mayers —talking about writing conventions— defined "an epistemology of individual experiences" (6).

Already in 1990, Wendy Bishop had outlined the limitations of a "teacher lecture" approach, which assumes that teachers "own knowledge and transmit it to students who are 'blank slates' or 'empty vessels' and [also work] to place the teacher in the pantheon of great writers and is satisfying to the teacher's ego" (45). With regard to the workshop method, Bishop quoted several scholars who criticised it heavily for focusing on final products only, including Eve Shelnutt, who also pointed out what I believe is a crucial flaw of how creative writing is taught in Italian schools: "most teachers of creative writing find the workshop format effective because it is the only format they know" (10).

Westbrook and Ryan's words really capture the superior quality of Bishop's extensive research:

Uniquely trained as a qualitative researcher and poet, Bishop transferred findings from cognitive studies in the field of composition-rhetoric to the creative writing classroom, applying the work of Flower, Hayes, Emig, Hairston, Sommers and others to pedagogical practice. In her earliest book on the subject, *Released into Language*, she describes a transactional workshop

designed to facilitate recursive processes of invention, drafting, and revision in ways that help creative writers better understand their own composing processes. [...] The influence of Bishop's work on creative writing's understanding of process paradigms is too extensive to attempt to cover here; let us simply say that she challenged and changed the status quo of the workshop, upending rather restrictive ideas of who creative writers could be and how creative writing comes into being. (64)

Released into Language, coincidentally, is the first of work on creative writing studies to make me question whether the lack of research in this field in Italy has somehow contributed to tutors generally imitating what has proved popular (rather than successful) without ever considering its efficacy.

The consequences of this one-size-fits-all approach can be seen in how the imitation of the anglophone model has settled in a non-anglophone context. The anglophone model—and the American creative writing programme in particular—has permeated Italian fiction workshops, recreating almost literally the vocabulary with which anglophone students should be very familiar, including a number of keywords ('the writer's toolbox', 'tricks of the trade') and mantras ('write about what you know', 'show, don't tell', 'less is more', etc.) quoted *ad nauseam* from creative writing handbooks, whether directly or not.

These expressions are dotted around on the schools' websites, often as part of a course plan. For example, "Write About What You Know" and "Show, Don't Tell" both appear as titles of lessons held at Scuola Omero, which also mentions 'the writer's toolbox' in several of its courses. The toolbox also appears on Scuola Holden's website (on seven different pages) and on Belleville's introduction page to its year-long Creative Writing course. Belleville's *Manuale di istruzioni della Scuola di scrittura Belleville* ('instruction manual to Belleville's school of writing') quotes the 'show, don't tell' principle (Papi and Borgna 86), which is also featured on the "topics covered" list of the year-long course in Creative Writing at Scuola Mohole on their website.

This influence really comes to light, however, when tutors point to fiction by authors like Raymond Carver, Paul Auster, William Faulkner or Dave Eggers as best practice, only occasionally referring to Italian writers to do the same. My experience of being at the receiving end of several creative writing workshops prompted me to check the advertised content section of several other courses.⁷ Raymond Carver, for example, is quoted in these courses at Scuola Holden (each designed and led by a different tutor): "(Almost) a True Story", "Calling Things by Their Name", "Stories of Extraordinary Places" and, in very large font, in "Writing Clinic". Carver also

7 In one of these, it became an in-joke to refer to Carver, Eggers and Auster as "the Holy Trinity".

features heavily in the required reading lists made available on Scuola Omero's website,⁸ and his short story "Popular Mechanics" was chosen as a case study lecture by Tiziano Scarpa in Lepri's *PANTA* (Scarpa 72-88).

Several students from other classes at Scuola Holden gave me recommended reading lists provided by their class tutors (see Appendix). These lists reveal two fundamental things: 1) that the course content varies substantially from one class to another, particularly in terms of quantity of works cited/recommended; and 2) that the predominance of male authors is undisputed (disgracefully, out of 95 authors, only 7 are women), more than half of them writing in English. Further limitations to these reading lists are similar to those exposed by Junot Díaz in his *MFA vs POC* in 2014, reflecting that in these workshops "the default subject position of reading and writing —of Literature with a capital L— [is] white, straight and male" (Díaz, par. 3).

Again, to make sure that this pattern is not peculiar to Scuola Holden, I looked for other required reading lists at other creative writing schools. Only one, Belleville, advertises its list publicly in its *Manuale di istruzioni*, which contains sample, introductory lessons to creative writing. The featured recommended reading list includes 38 Italian authors, 44 foreign authors (non-anglophone), and 83 anglophone authors (Papi and Borgna 213-225).

This leads me to consider that, in addition to "consciously or unconsciously imposing Raymond Carver's style [...], as if this particular aesthetic is universally appropriate" (Westbrook and Ryan 204), by modelling their classes on anglophone literature, tutors often miss the opportunity to offer an innovative close-reading of Italian literature —contemporary or classic— from a writer's point of view along the lines of the University of East Anglia model for their BA in Creative Writing: "to complement the critical study of English literature with insights gained from the practice of writing and to complement the practice of writing with insights gained from the critical study of English literature" (qtd. in Cowan, par. 7). Dino Buzzati, Antonio Tabucchi, Natalia Ginzburg, Primo Levi, Beppe Fenoglio, Elsa Morante, Umberto Eco and the more contemporary Stefano Benni and Elena Ferrante, are just some of the many Italian writers that might be brought into the classroom to join the regularly included Italo Calvino.

Apart from showing little consideration to Italian authors, when they refer to English-language texts in translation, tutors consistently disregard the work of literary translators by not acknowledging neither them or their contributions. I have interviewed twelve coursemates

⁸ The power of western or, more precisely, Anglo-American pedagogies on writing is hardly being concealed if one considers after whom some of these schools have been named: Scuola Carver (Livorno), Flannery O'Connor (Milan), Molly Bloom (Rome) and Scuola Holden, where Salinger's quote "It's funny. Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody" is painted in great orange letters above the immense staircase right at the entrance.

who, to the question “has your tutor mentioned the literary translator’s contribution to any particular texts”, have simply replied “no”. Considering all the effort that has been made to liberate translators from the invisibility cloak under which they have been trapped for as long as literary translation has existed, this is a huge step backwards. As noted above, the boundaries between literary translation and creative writing are blurred, yet we can still see a tendency to dismiss the creative role of the translator in favour of a more linguistic approach to translation.

Lastly, teaching Italian writers to write like American authors (or, more precisely, like their Italian translators) could have repercussions for the production of new national literature, accelerating a process of cultural homogenisation as widely documented in other artistic fields.⁹ Clearly, I am not the first person to raise this concern, since, in her foreword to the 1997 special issue of *Panta* on creative writing, editor Laura Lepri comments: “to anyone who is concerned about the homologation of literature or imperialism of the American cultural system from which [creative writing] models derive, we will simply reply that the teaching of rhetoric, a higher and noble form of writing, belongs firmly in our Greek and Latin tradition, in Aristotle, in Cicero” (16, my translation).

What Lepri addresses here is a more general question on what is the point of teaching writing, rather than considering *how* writing is taught and what pedagogical tools (including reading lists) are being proposed by creative writing schools who are drawing so directly from anglophone models.

My understanding is that the autonomous and private nature of creative writing schools has resulted in less accountability and looser considerations of pedagogical outcomes. Nonetheless, perhaps capitalising on their nonconformist image and methods,¹⁰ their approach—and business model—has proved successful, at least as far as student numbers are concerned.

Besides, unless prospective students have some specific parameters allowing them to compare one teaching method against another, they probably enrol on the basis of other criteria, such as the course’s cost, content, length, suitability and popularity. In my experience, the most decisive criterion is students’ perception of whether attending a creative writing school can increase their chances to be published. This can be deduced not only by the great emphasis that most of these

9 For example, see Adams, L. L. “Globalization of Culture and the Arts” in *Sociology Compass*, 1, 2007, 127-142

10 From Scuola Holden’s website: “The school was named Holden because the idea was to create a school Holden Caulfield would never have been expelled from. In other words, a place for out of the ordinary people. In a way, choosing that name represented a commitment. To this day, in fact, the school has had a very singular way to ‘raise’ students. The methods, principles and rules that are used at Scuola Holden are quite difficult to find in other schools.” (Scuola Holden)

schools lay on the industry-focused and craft-based nature of their courses, yet another legacy from the anglophone pedagogy, but also from the explicit and implicit networking opportunities offered by creative writing schools, which will be explored in the next section.

3. CREATIVE WRITING SCHOOLS AND THE ITALIAN PUBLISHING SECTOR

Some writing schools offer students, on completion of their course, the opportunity to pitch their ideas—ranging from book/film synopses to digital/videogames storytelling projects—to an audience of professionals from the creative arts sector. Scuola Holden's *Opening Doors* pitching event attracts professionals from publishing houses, literary agencies, major TV and cinema production companies and news and media companies. Students at Belville can take part in a “networking event with publishers, literary agencies, journalists, production studios and cultural organisations” (Belleville).

Whilst these opportunities—which are still fairly rare in the landscape of creative writing schools—are advertised explicitly, it is much more difficult to identify the networking mechanisms taking place behind closed doors. Since many of Italy's literary sensations over the past few years are alumni of these schools,¹¹ their role in smoothing students' paths to publication should not be underestimated. Students are often noticed by their tutors and specifically chosen for professional collaborations or introduced to editors and publishers via the schools' internal networks. Luca Pareschi finds that editors rely on “cultural intermediaries” to select new authors because they “simply cannot cope with the overwhelming number of proposals, as there are very few editors in each publishing house” (406).

These intermediaries are usually professionals in the cultural sector—authors, booksellers, intellectuals, radio presenters, critics, academics, journalists or translators—but rarely literary agents. Literary agents in Italy “do not search for talented unpublished authors, because in such a small market it is not economically rewarding to do so” and rely on providing other commercial services for income, for example reading and giving feedback on authors' manuscripts for a fee but not brokering on their behalf (408).

Without literary agents working as proper talent scouts, if an aspiring author does not know any cultural intermediary the chances of their manuscript being read by an editor are next to zero. This is also because publishers actively seek to cut down the number of manuscripts they receive by raising barriers to submission, for example by falsely stating that they do not accept unsolicited submissions (412).

¹¹ Paolo Giordano, Marco Missiroli, Davide Longo (Scuola Holden); Andrea Tarabbia, Alessandra Sarchi (Bottega Finzioni); Gianrico Carofiglio (Scuola Omero), etc.

The limitations of this process are hardly challenged in the cultural sector, if even students in creative writing schools are being warned of the importance to make contacts in the right places. Now, what exactly does that mean? How is an aspiring writer meant to find cultural intermediaries willing to read his or her manuscript and to broker it? Pareschi says that serial intermediaries “are less than 10 in the [whole] Italian literary field”, and that they “make themselves very easy for aspiring authors to contact”; yet, he does not explicitly say who they are or where and how exactly they advertise their services (412).

Serial intermediaries, it is important to clarify, are not paid for their intermediation. However, “as they come to be recognised as reliable selectors and arbiters of taste, they can access professional positions, such as editor and advisor, within publishing houses”. Their symbolic capital is further strengthened, says Pareschi, when they decide to “increas[e] their legitimation within the field by teaching in creative writing schools or being part of the juries for literary prizes” (414).

Symbolic capital can translate to a greater potential for growth in economic capital when these intermediaries are fast-tracked into professional opportunities because of the prestige they have accumulated; meaning that this system not only affects the selection of manuscripts, but also employment in the wider cultural sector, too.

Furthermore, the power dynamics motivating some of these intermediaries of concern. An anonymous intermediary interviewed by Pareschi stated:

I am a door keeper of the Republic of Letters. A door keeper of the outer circle, so everyone can see me. I have an enormous power because I let 5 out of 1000 manuscripts pass. There are other entrances. But if I close the door, the door is closed. (414)

There was a time when people used to call the Italian publishing sector the ‘Republic of Letters’ to highlight how, in such a small field, everyone knew each other (Pareschi, 405). Today, perhaps the number of manuscripts that publishers receive might have increased exponentially, but the fact that the field is still governed by personal connections —and a relatively small elite— remains unquestionable.

From the writer’s point of view, this means that you are either lucky enough to know someone whose opinion matters very much, or you are not going to overcome the first, most important stage of the mediating process between production and consumption of literary works. Capitalising on authors’ frustration are a plethora of ill-intentioned vanity presses or self-proclaimed literary agencies selling editorial advice.

These tensions are exacerbated by the paradox of having imported an anglophone model

of teaching creative writing (supposedly aimed at producing publishable literature) into a system that prioritises connections over talent, thereby building students' expectations in an environment where they are very unlikely to be satisfied. In light of the consequences of these dynamics, one cannot ignore Stephanie Vanderslice's call for "more responsible creative writing teaching" which asked programmes "to become more responsive to the needs of their students by providing more courses in publishing careers, literary citizenship, and supporting oneself as a writer" (Vanderslice). The publishing sector is also in urgent need of a change. It needs to adopt transparent practice to make it easier for authors and other professionals (editors, translators, etc.) to understand manuscript selection and hiring processes, and provide clear guidance on how to meet publishers' requirements.

This links to a much larger discourse which certainly needs more research: whether or not, by endorsing this system, schools are making their way to the centre of the literary field, building their prestige and establishing themselves as new cultural intermediaries.

4. THE THIRD ACT OF CREATIVE WRITING IN ITALY

While private creative writing schools currently monopolise creative writing courses in Italy, it is to be hoped that this will change. Other nations in southern Europe, where a similar resistance to the institutionalisation of creative writing courses persisted until fairly recently, have opened their universities' doors to the discipline. For example, the University of Coimbra in Portugal has recently obtained official accreditation of its first master's degree in creative writing, to be launched in academic year 2021/2022. In Spain there are several established master's degrees and postgraduate courses (offered by Universidad de Salamanca, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Universidad de Sevilla, etc.)

The time is unquestionably right for initiating a conversation about academic alternatives to the private creative writing course, starting with identifying some of the obstacles that might be encountered in the process of introducing creative writing in Italian academia.

When I interviewed Linda Lappin on the topic, she outlined three major obstacles: class size and teaching staff; and the fragmentation of humanities departments into "useless" degrees.¹²

Both Lappin and Durante agree that class size is a substantial issue: "in the humanities programmes, also in the *magistrale* [postgraduate] courses, generally there are no size limits to classes—a [professor] would easily have over 100 students in a class" says Lappin, adding

¹² Linda Lappin is a graduate of the Iowa MFA Creative Writing and Literary Translation programme; she was an assistant to Paul Engle, who directed the program for many years before founding the International Writing Program at Iowa; and has been a long-term resident of Italy and language and arts educator in the Italian university system

that personal attention to each student's work would be difficult, particularly when it comes to marking assignments, a task which "Italian professors absolutely hate" (Duranti). This, however, is an issue that has already been tackled in literary translation courses, where class numbers are more manageable, rarely exceeding 25-30 students per class (Duranti).

With regard to teaching staff, Lappin raises a very interesting point: "if indeed creative writing were to become an accredited discipline, who would teach such courses and how would they be chosen and what formative itinerary would be required of them?". Would they be professors of literature, linguistics, semiotics, etc. like Umberto Eco? Or would it be "writers of stature"? Creative writing programmes, in anglophone and non-anglophone universities (such as Spanish universities and the University of Coimbra in Portugal), must have had to answer similar questions. It is therefore wise to consider options that have proved successful in academic courses outside our borders and learn from those that have not. The MA in Creative Writing at University of Coimbra features an interesting combination of teaching staff from literary and linguistic departments, plus several writers in residence, along with seminars held by guest professionals of the publishing and cultural sector.

This is only one of the options available to course directors. Another could see creative writing courses spin off from literary translation degrees, as Duranti endeavoured to achieve before creative writing schools existed. There are several examples of anglophone universities successfully running postgraduate qualifications in creative writing and literary translation, for example: University of Dublin, Trinity College (Ireland), Victoria University of Wellington (New Zealand) and the University of East Anglia (United Kingdom). Victoria University's MA in Creative Writing is taught by the world-famous Institute of Modern Letters, while its more recent but equally excellent MA in Literary Studies is taught by the School of Languages and Cultures (with PhDs options also available); however, there does not seem to be shared teaching or a significant body of shared research between these two courses. Conversely, at University of East Anglia, the postgraduate courses in Literary Translation and Creative Writing are held by the same school, the School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing, and these courses do have some shared teaching and plenty of other shared learning opportunities. A most recent example of this is the inclusion of a literary translation panel ("Translation as Creative Writing Practice") in the Futures for Creative Writing Conference, celebrating 50 years of Creative Writing at UEA in May 2021; or of the panel "Creative Writing as Translation" in the British Centre for Literary Translation Summer School in July 2021.

What I have presented here are successful efforts to recognise literary translation as a creative practice by strengthening its affiliation to creative writing courses; and what I am suggesting is that one way to introduce creative writing in Italian academia would be by affiliation to literary translation.

In whatever way the first creative writing courses are established in Italian academia, Lappin's observation that "not all great writers are good teachers of writing and vice versa" must remain a reference point. Compared to private schools, universities would be in the position to set the bar higher by expecting their tutors to develop more solid pedagogies and more sensible learning objectives for their students.

The third obstacle identified by Lappin is difficult to address in a few paragraphs, but it is notable nonetheless. She refers to the weight of "useless degrees" as a hot topic in the Italian press and the consequent challenge to justify the public system funding degree programmes which "produce graduates for whom there is no need in the job market". This, of course, already applies to existing degrees—such as Philosophy, History, Italian Studies—but the issue is exacerbated by the fact that "in the case of graduates of writing programs, Italy would offer not only no jobs, but probably no guaranteed access to publication [either]" (Lappin).¹³

Lappin is touching on a sensitive topic here which overlaps some of the issues highlighted in the previous section about creative writing schools and the publishing sector. She argues that rather than being discouraged by charges of teaching on a 'useless degree', professionals and academics should see an opportunity to reconsider current practice in both the publishing sector and the teaching of creative writing to promote professionalisation and more transparent policies.

It is legitimate to worry over potential lack of funding and how "the current financial and ideological climate within higher education seems to foster contraction and consolidation—not expansion and fragmentation—of academic programmes, especially in the humanities", as advanced by Tim Mayers when he was debating on whether Creative Writing Studies should have its own degrees and departments (2). However, I argue that introducing creative writing (and creative writing studies) into Italian universities would in fact revitalise humanities departments and bring many advantages, addressing current gaps in how the discipline is currently taught and potentially sparking a series of other initiatives, as in the US:

Associated with MFA programs and also undergraduate programs, most universities also sponsor secondary programs of all kinds: summer workshops, writing events, workshops for younger people and high school students, study abroad programs focused on creative writing, continuing education programs, creative writing courses or workshops for prisons, drug rehabilitation initiatives, victims of domestic abuse, etc., online program and online degree programs, collaborations with libraries, museums as well as readings series attended by the whole academic

13 This problem has been raised by critics of the Creative Writing MFA in the United States, too. For a review of similar criticism and for an interesting take on alternative uses of the MFA, I recommend Childress and Gerber 2015.

community —and also, literary journals of high quality, funded by universities, often partly staffed by students in MFA programs— all of which contributes to a rich, diversified, and vibrant literary community, and has helped grow the ranks of readers and consumers of books and literature (Lappin).

The introduction of creative writing courses in Italian academia would benefit both aspiring authors and universities, where any type of writing practice has been so heavily discouraged in literary and scientific departments alike. Tullio de Mauro says that “we rarely write, especially in higher education, [...] where it is possible that for four years in a literary department [we have] not written a single line only to find ourselves drowning in the *mare magnum* of the dissertation” (De Mauro and Lepri 244, my translation).

Since De Mauro’s statement, little has changed. Even today, Italian students have rare opportunities to practise their methodological and academic writing skills, unlike their anglophone peers, for whom the academic essay is a form of learning assessment.

For example, the University of Milan only offers a 20-hour workshop aimed at producing a 100-word (yes, one *hundred*-word) argumentative essay as a tool to learn the skills that students need to demonstrate in their final dissertation according to the Framework for the Qualification of the European Higher Education Area (Dota 113). This shows that resistance to the written word extends beyond creative writing courses. This view is supported by Lappin, who talks of the “horrendous *ripetizione*” and the traditional preference for oral over written exams as a pedagogical method which is still “the hidden backbone of the Italian system” (Lappin).

De Mauro also points out that in literary departments a close relationship with literary texts has been lost in the urgency of teaching facts, theories, schools of thought—in other words: other people’s opinions on literary texts. Students are expected to memorise theories from history of literature handbooks, rather than being encouraged to read literary texts and develop their own critical skills (Lepri 249). As Lepri realised fairly soon after the establishment of creative writing schools in Italy, one of their side effects was to produce a “battalion of more aware and more demanding readers [...], qualified cultural consumers” (ii). Creative writing practice has a demonstrable impact on the way literature can be read, and students and writers could benefit from a much stronger connection between writing and reading literary texts, with less external intervention.

Just as universities could experiment with a less theory-fixated approach, students of creative writing could do with more literary contextualisation of what they read and with developing critical skills to be able to meta-cognitively describe their writing process as suggested by Dianne Donnelly (84). As for the discipline itself, the emergence of the creative writing studies field is a response to decades of practice-led approaches in anglophone academia and demonstrates what suggested by

Trent Hergenrader in his 2016 manifesto:

For those working in academic settings that recognize and encourage artistic achievement in writing, creative writing research grounds and validates our successful practices using language that makes sense to scholars from different disciplines; for those in institutions that focus their energy on applied degrees, creative writing research provides evidence of the thoughtful and practical value of the skills we teach. (6)

Opening up to research in creative writing means, first of all, regularly questioning the efficacy of our teaching methods; sharing the results of our discoveries and experiments; discussing theories, forms, pedagogies and sociological processes taking place before, during and after courses and within the institutions facilitating them. Research would be further enhanced by an inspired and inspiring teaching approach whereby tutors take an interest in students as writers and individuals who are on an educational and professional journey.

On an international level, I can see how research in creative writing in languages other than English could open new avenues in creative writing studies. On the one hand, it would pave the way for research in contexts with a strong focus on multilingualism and indigenous literature. On the other, research within institutions interested in introducing creative writing into their modern foreign languages departments could lead to further studies investigating the impact of creativity on language acquisition and vice versa, building on decades of theories about creativity and translation in the literary translation studies field.

CONCLUSION

Vocation, the yearning for a structured learning path and desire to see their works published lure aspiring Italian authors deep into treacherous terrains. In this broad overview of the status quo of creative writing in Italy, I have presented some of the barriers and flaws in the way creative writing is currently taught: financial barriers limit access to creative writing schools; importation of the workshop method has occasioned not only the expected pedagogical concerns, but novel issues arising from drawing so directly from anglophone methods and literature; and schools seem to endorse a system in which social ties govern the cultural sector.

Finally, I have argued for the introduction of creative writing in Italian academia, highlighting some advantages that would derive from a more inclusive, more responsible and more considered approach to teaching creative writing. My argument is not to replace creative writing schools or dismiss the cultural value they have brought so far, but rather to open access to this learning, aiming for more transparent practice across the board, and to adopt a more balanced creative-critical approach linking creative writing to Italian classic literature and contemporary

literary production, promoting research, professionalization and knowledge exchange.

I sincerely hope that when we get to the stage of welcoming creative writing into Italian academia, we will not have forgotten what has been done so far in Italy and outside our borders. As Andrea Graziosi said, referring to the danger of radical thought in his critical overview of Italian governance in universities: “To move forward it is almost always more effective to improve and replace, rather than reset” (qtd. in Moretti 16, my translation).

To change the narrative and enter the third act of creative writing in Italy, I suggest that we learn from the innovations that have been introduced in creative writing schools, while thinking critically about what could be improved; that we do not forget about our literary translation degrees and how they have overcome so many of the obstacles that we currently perceive as insurmountable; and that we let ourselves be inspired by the advances international scholars have made by reflecting on creative writing theory, practice and pedagogies in the creative writing studies field.

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Appendix: Recommended Authors

Class 1		Class 2		Class 3	
Bukowski, C.	English	Agassi, A.	English	Baricco, A.	Italian
Buzzati, D.	Italian	Auster, P.	English	Capote, T.	English
Cheever, J.	English	Berto, G.	Italian	Carrère, E.	French
D'Arzo, S.	Italian	Calvino, I.	Italian	Carver, R.	English
Dostoevsky, F.	Russian	Eggers, D.	English	Cercas, J.	Spanish
Flaubert, G.	French	Hunt, W.	English	Dubus, A.	English
Ginzburg, N.	Italian	Kushner, T.	English	Faulkner, W.	English
Kafka, F.	German	Kristof, A.	French	Flaubert, G.	French
Kristof, A.	French	McCarthy, F.	English	Haruf, K.	English
McCormack, E.	English	Pascale, A.	Italian	Hemingway, E.	English
Roth, P.	English	Tondelli, P. V.	Italian	Nabokov, V.	English
Salinger, J. D.	English	Wallace, D. F.	English	O'Connor, F.	English
Tolstov, L.	Russian			Tolstoy, L.	Russian
Verga, G.	Italian			Vonnegut, K.	English
Class 4		Class 5		Class 6	
Andreev, L.	Russian	Agassi, A.	English	Arpino, G.	Italian
Auster, P.	English	Balestrini, N.	Italian	Auster, P.	English
Bernhard, T.	German	Bellow, S.	English	Calvino, I.	Italian
Berto, G.	Italian	Benjamin, W.	German	Carver, R.	English
Borges, J. L.	Spanish	Calvino, I.	Italian	Cheever, J.	English
Bufalino, G.	Italian	Capote, T.	English	Coetzee, J. M.	English
Bulgakov, M.	Russian	Cechov, A.	Russian	Eco, U.	Italian
Canetti, E.	German	Conrad, J.	English	Fenoglio, B.	English
Capote, T.	English	Cusk, R.	English	Fitzgerald, F. S.	English
Carpi, A.	Italian	Dickens, C.	English	Forster, E. M.	English
Cechov, A.	Russian	Durrenmatt, F.	German	Hemingway, E.	English
Cercas, J.	Spanish	Faulkner, W.	English	Keyes, D.	English
De Amicis, E.	Italian	Fenoglio, B.	Italian	King, S.	English
Delillo, D.	English	Fielding, H.	English	Landolfi, T.	Italian
Dostoevsky, F.	Russian	Frank, A.	Dutch	London, J.	English
Ginzburg, N.	Italian	Hemingway, E.	English	Munro, A.	English
Joyce, J.	English	King, S.	English	Pavese, C.	Italian

Class 4 (continued)		Class 5 (continued)		Class 6 (continued)	
Kazantzakis, N.	Greek	Lagioia, N.	Italian	Poe, E. A.	English
Kis, D.	Serbian	Levi, P.	Italian	Rushdie, S.	English
Levi, P.	Italian	Lewis, C. S.	English	Siti, W.	Italian
Nove, A.	English	Manzoni, A.	Italian	Williams, J. E.	English
Ortese, A. M.	Italian	Monterroso, A.	Spanish	Woolf, V.	English
Parise, G.	Italian	Nabokov, V.	English		
Piovene, G.	Italian	O'Hagan, A.	English		
Scarpa, T.	Italian	Parise, G.	Italian		
Sciascia, L.	Italian	Poe, E. A.	English		
Siti, L.	Italian	Salinger, J. D.	English		
Stein, G.	English	Saunders, G.	English		

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