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A Question on Genre:  
The Binary of the Creative/Theoretical Text  
in Elif Batuman's *The Possessed*

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In charting the religious, artistic, and cultural genealogy of the space deemed as 'The Ivory Tower,' historian of science Steven Shapin boldly asserts that it, though significant, was always a figure of speech. But the image of such a glorious, secular tower raises questions of its contradictions and symbolisms. The towers "might be defensible structures" or they could be "spaces of contemplation, expressive gestures at closeness to the divine and practical ways of distancing inhabitants from mundane human affairs" (Shapin 2) in any art and religious spaces. The various instantiations of the Ivory Tower culminated in its present form years before World War II (13) and what we call the Ivory Tower now has a close cultural association with a university, especially an American university and the language of science (7).

This Ivory Tower conjures up "the idea of the university as a defective institution, needing correction and reform" (14). Like the artists at the start of the century, those in the university questioned whether the towers should be "detached free spaces or armouries of ideological opposition to fascism and Nazism" (14). Academic disciplines and programs such as the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences experienced the tensions more so than the natural sciences, engineering, and professionalized studies, a reflection of the "symbolic and practical positioning of the universities themselves" (14). Shapin notes this imagined but powerful image of the tower is "suggestive of many stories about modernization, secularization, democratization and the commodification of culture" (25), which now has been revised to narrate the Ivory Tower as solely belonging to the university in the middle of the twentieth century

It is this attachment to the Ivory Tower that upholds its flattened ideology. And it is only ever linked to a university setting, where criticisms of gatekeeping are abundant in the defective but ever so prominently self-preserving institution that reinforces its power. But it is also this image of an Ivory Tower that has simplified our understanding of work done outside of the university.

Creative writing, notably different from creativity in research methods, has long been a contested form in academic writing. In the introduction of *The Possessed*, Elif Batuman begins her literary essay collection with an immediate reference to Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*. For Batuman, the working question of the very long and complex novel is quite simple: "How does someone who doesn't actually have tuberculosis end up spending seven years at a tuberculosis sanatorium?" (Batuman 3). She rewrites Mann's working question to pose a similar one for herself, to justify regarding her decision to enter the Stanford comparative literature department as a person "with no real academic aspirations" and who ends "up spending seven years in suburban California studying the form of the Russian novel?" (3). Love is an abstract answer to the parallel questions posed by the reader and writer. But it is not enough of an answer to guide her more obscured question about the ideological underpinnings of institutions.

Within the first page and a half, Batuman sets up her story as a life within literature, particularly Russian literature, in an institutional framing. The dilemma for Batuman, who studied linguistics as an undergraduate, was how to continue with her love of literature in addition to fulfilling her dreams of writing a novel. The question of love, then, becomes a question of which programmatic vision best supports this love.

Having spent much of my own life in abandoned doctoral programs and am now in an MFA program, I find Batuman's thoughts on genre and programs illuminating and reflective of our tendency to collectively and conveniently uphold binaries in academia. Despite our constant rehearsals and writing against binaries, programs construct and guard their borders and boundaries, and their instructors and students, some more unwittingly than not, are engaged in creating genre-

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specific expectations for their genre-specific programs. Batuman herself expresses uncertainty between scholarly pursuits and what is considered creative writing, revealing an unsettled writing practice that centers hierarchy, rigor in creative nonfiction writing, and the state of the university. Batuman's anthology, a direct reference to Dostoevsky's famed novel on intellectual morality, is one that lovingly embraces enthusiasm of reading and researching the lives of texts. Within these vignettes, though perhaps obscured, are offerings of an institutional critique and some thoughts on a peculiar thing called genre that reveals obstinately rigid ideologies and beliefs. This is especially pertinent as many from the so-called Ivory Tower have looked at creative writing as liberatory.

### **A Question on Craft**

Whereas objectivity and discipline-specific jargon are expected in research articles, creative writing emphasizes poignant storytelling, or what Batuman may uncharitably dismiss as simple craft. In the opening vignette, Batuman writes that, at the time, she was uninterested by what I knew of literary theory and history" (10). Theory, she interpreted was,

...bad for writers, infecting them with a hostility toward language and making them turn out postmodern; and what did it have to offer anyway, besides the reduction of a novel to a set of unpleasant facts about power structures, or the superficial thrill of juxtaposing *Pride and Prejudice* with the uncertainty principle? As for history, it struck me as pedantic, unambitious. Why all that trouble to prove things that nobody would ever dispute in the first place, like that an earlier author had influenced a later author? (10)

This convenient portrait of theory as somehow solely inside academic spaces is at odds with bell hooks' reminder on the possibility of theory outside of such confined spaces. Theory should be a liberatory practice, its power extraordinary because it provides a way to do things differently, to look at the world differently, using theory as an intervention, as a way to challenge the status quo" (hooks

59). hooks is firm in her belief that strong theories are formed through the lived experience of critical thinking, of reflection, and analysis” (61). No gap exists between theory and practice when actual lived experiences of theorizing are linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation” (61). Though she thinks of theory as a space, a location of healing” (59) and as a sanctuary in ‘theorizing” (61), its language does not have to be limited to the imagined Ivory Tower.

What was certain for Batuman was the need to attempt long-form writing. After all, her plan for after graduation was still to write a novel—but writing novels takes time, and time is expensive” (17). To temper uncertainty, she cautiously applied to some PhD literature programs, but did not consider getting a creative writing MFA, because I knew they made you pay tuition, and go to workshops” (17). She further reflects upon the prospects of a non-academic track in writing:

Whatever reservations I had about the usefulness of reading and analyzing great novels went double for reading and analyzing the writings of a bunch of kids like me. I did, however, send an application to an artists’ colony on Cape Cod. To my surprise, they offered me a fiction writing fellowship, on the basis of a seventy-five-page first-person narrative I had written from the perspective of a dog. (17)

And so she drives herself to Cape Cod and speaks to the program director, a windswept, gray-eyed local writer of romantic appearance, treated me with remarkable kindness, especially considering my status as the twenty-one-year-old author of a first-person dog novella” (18). She soon found out our priorities and our worldviews were not synchronized” (18). Upon hearing that Batuman had applied to graduate schools, the director advises her if you want to be an academic, go to graduate school. If you want to be a writer, come here” (18).

Batuman had assumed that reading and writing were neither separate nor distinct from each other. As she contemplates her next steps, a binary emerges, that of academic writing and creative writing, most prominent in the program director’s own assessment of the different programs.

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Batuman herself acknowledges she wanted to be a writer, not an academic” but had reached some conclusive state of disillusionment with the transcendentalist New England culture of ‘creative writing’” (18). Where the conventional academic may be obsessed with scientific rigor and theoretical framing, Batuman immediately asserts that creative writing programs are obsessed with craft.

In this culture, to which the writing workshop belonged, the academic study of literature was understood to be bad for a writer’s formulation. By what mechanism, I found myself wondering, was it bad? Conversely, why was it automatically good for a writer to live in a barn, reading short stories by short-story writers who didn’t seem to be read by anyone other than writing students? (18)

It is in this passage that Batuman paints creative writing and its proponents as quite rigid with their beliefs and reflects a particular community. This is as if academic programs themselves are not equally rigid and house their own specific community. More importantly, creative writing is not as liberatory or any less exclusionary than a conventional academic program might be. Creative writing colonies share, maintain, and uphold writerly cultural norms and expectations. In his own critique in *Craft in the Real World*, Matthew Salesses cautions against fetishizing the mythologization of creative writing and to imagine an alternative against current models of craft and writing workshops, which have long excluded marginalized and minoritized writers. Much like the tendency to extract from theories, craft theory has its own standardizing and universalizing impact on the assumed reader, writer, and general audience.

Craft is about who has the power to write stories, what stories are historicized and who historicizes them, and who gets to write literature and who folklore, whose writing is important and to whom, in what context. This is the process of standardization. If craft is teachable, it is because standardization is teachable. These standards must be challenged and

disempowered. Too often craft is taught only as what has already been taught before.

(Salesses 20-21)

Standards and standardization in creative writing endeavors rely on and enforce assumed community legibility. The argument that one should know the rules before breaking them is really an argument about who gets to make the rules, whose rules get to be the norms and determine the exceptions” (Salesses 6). Or, put in another way, power continually reveals itself to hinder change and stifle creativity. Standards in craft theory and storytelling are aspects of the institutional critiques Batuman and Salesses are reflecting upon.

### **A Question on Theory (of Love)**

Batuman eventually turns down the writing fellowship and accepts an offer to study in the comparative literature department at Stanford where she was awarded five years of funding (Batuman 19). A love for texts and literature becomes part of the complex academic work and everyday life Batuman tries to capture alongside her ability to relay dense literary prose. The deeply complex, idiosyncratic approach to writing, a weaving of different approaches that changes in tone and structures, displays her own confusion between genre expectations. And like any PhD students know, Batuman finds herself in distressing situations caused largely by institutional and departmental dysfunction.

Batuman admits that the role of theory caused her to side with the academics. She had stopped believing that theoretical language and using theory had the power to ruin literature for anyone, or that it was possible to compromise something you loved by studying it” (22). And, again, she references Mann and Dostoevsky in her defense of theory: Was love really such a tenuous thing? Wasn’t the point of love that it made you want to learn more, to immerse yourself, to become possessed?” (22). Perhaps it is in this sentiment here that Batuman dispels institutional norms that

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are so often fraught in and between academic and literary spaces and genres. Batuman's blurring of the genres and language outside of their traditional homes materializes in her essays, published by a non-academic, mainstream press.

But she is committed to justifying why she chose Stanford, displaying some reverence to more academic forms of writing. Any critique in her essays is targeted toward the differential attitude toward craft writing, that its proponents mark it as different from academia. She rarely thought of the choice she made between creative writing and literary criticism until she was asked to analyze the genre called the American short story using the *Best American Short Stories* anthologies of 2004 and 2005 as data.

Only then, as I turned the pages in the name of science, did I find myself remembering the emptiness I had felt on that rainy day on Cape Cod. I remembered then the puritanical culture of creative writing, embodied by colonies and workshops and the ideal of craft." I realized I would greatly prefer to think of literature as a profession, an art, a science, or pretty much anything else, rather than a craft. What did craft ever try to say about the world, the human condition, or the search for meaning? All it had were its negative dictates: Show, don't tell"; Murder your darlings"; Omit needless words." As if writing were a matter of overcoming bad habits—of omitting needless words. (Batuman 19)

Noting that the literary criticism discourse is no less susceptible than the creative writing workshop to charges of self-sufficiency and hermeticism" it does have a fundamentally collaborative premise" (21). If citations are well-crafted and honest, each work of criticism is supposed to build upon the existing body of work, to increase the sum total of human understanding...It's supposed to be cumulative—it believes in progress" (21). She contrasts this ideal image of literary criticism from the creative writing workshop, which appears to possess and involve a collaborative process but that very process is systematically effaced from the finished product" (21). That is, a text may not

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necessarily involve research or any sign of living discourse; instead, it is read as a self-contained text that contain virtually no reference to any interesting work being done in the field over the past twenty, fifty, or hundred years” (21).

Batman’s description here is that of a literature review, proof of the scholar’s ability to competently demonstrate their knowledge of the existing scholarship and to suggest a newer direction. This is just standard academia. Batuman does not use the word institution in her literary criticism, yet the stories that unfold are a complicated relationship between Russian literature and Batuman’s life, all of which take place in a formative institutional setting. Pairing Foucault’s observation regarding the balance between life and literature in the plot, she reflects on the impact of *Don Quixote*. Another research question manifests from literary analogies; this time, it is a methodological question that is the catalyst in Batuman’s essays. I began to wonder about possible methods for bringing one’s life closer to one’s favorite books” (24). Forgoing the desire to imitate novel writing, in which characters try to resemble the characters in the books they find meaningful” (25), Batuman urges and encourages, What if you tried study instead of imitation, and metonymy instead of metaphor?” (25). That is, rather than recreate the lived experiences of the character, Batuman proposes a more scholarly study of the original author, a method that diverges from Barthes’ conceit of the death of the author. In his vision for a strong reading practice, Barthes argues against what he then considered as a traditionalist approach to reading, which relied on connecting the text, its context, and the author’s biography. Proper textual analysis without all of these factors can thus produce the ultimate meaning of a text. The author’s voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins” (Barthes 142).

Where Barthes’ method primarily focuses on reading, the ideology is shared by writers who perceive their writerly identities as unique from their personhood. Elena Ferrante, in charting her own confusions and transgressions as a writer and reader, contemplates her oft-cited passages from



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Virginia Woolf's *A Writer's Diary*. Woolf's self-image for herself and herself as a writer is an entity completely autonomous in relation to the biographically defined person (Virginia), which produces the written word in a separate space with extreme concentration" (Ferrante 32). Ferrante admits she is still fond of this image but finds it challenging to clarify the two roles.

Batuman does not elucidate the two roles and sets out to continually blur the boundaries between reading and writing. Her *Possessed* tells a nearly non-linear story of life in and outside of the texts and academy. And her writing displays her ability to analyze beyond the text, to tell a different kind of story that honors texts, supplementary texts, the lives of the authors, and the archives. Her retelling of Dostoevsky's mad intellectuals involves reading and writing about reading, activities that travel with her throughout her studies in America, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Russia in more contemporary times. The first essay, "Babel in California," at once sets the tone for Batuman's prose, somewhere between scholarly theorizing and personal narrative. These very particular tonal perspectives may appear in direct contrasts with each other, and it is obvious Batuman does not subscribe to any single genre form. The essay begins almost too formally and provides extensive background information about the author Isaac Babel. Some three pages later, Batuman inserts her own history with the author's text, sardonically recalling she had first read his work in a creative writing class. The second time she read Babel, she had been a graduate student. She compares the two periods of her life and how differently she was taught to read them, and how she herself interpreted the text.

Babel becomes a significant literary figure in this essay and for her eventual work in academia, a combination of love and labor. For a seminar presentation, she wrote about the double-entry relationship in Babel's work between literature and lived experience" centering Babel's short story "Pan Apolek" (Batuman 39). The presentation was well-received, and she expanded on the

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paper at a Slavic colloquium, where it caught the interest of the department Babel expert” who offered to help her revise the paper for publication (39).

The details in Batuman’s research at the archives and libraries read like a somewhat unorganized, chaotic methods section of an academic paper. But, as her essays do not cohere to a particular format or genre, the data gathering aspect of her experiences become part of her everyday narrative as a student. In these stories, there is no separation between the theory, the archives or empirical gathering, and the scholar and writer’s own narrative. Batuman resists the imposed position of the allegedly neutral scholar. Yet, in her introduction, she states she is not against factually crafted narratives of a writer’s life. She poses another what if” question in her litany of research-based creative writing: What if you wrote a book and it was all true?” (25). She fleshes out the abstract question with a definite case study: What if instead you went to Balzac’s house and Madame Hanska’s estate, read every word he ever wrote, dug up every last thing you could about him—and *then* start writing?” (25).

The details of her laborious research are revealed through long passages from texts, from photographs and posters, and from her synthesis of the historical background of the authors’ lives. Her initial suspicion towards theory and history has disappeared as she pores through these materials in the early stages of her graduate studies. Batuman’s work forms in all of the conventional aspects of an early researcher. She takes part in the international conference for Babel hosted by Stanford and shepherded by Grisha Freidin, the department Babel expert.

There is a sense of repetition of academic tasks Batuman describes, a reflection of the work expected in graduate studies. There are more conferences, there are more travel-research adventures, and there are more of Batuman’s literary analyses that connect her personal adventures with her literary theorizing. She attends yet another international conference, on Leo Tolstoy, hosted on the grounds of Yasnaya Polyana, the estate where Tolstoy was born, lived, and buried. The specifics of

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Batuman's research almost clouds her pointed yet fleeting gestures to the politics of departmental funding. For the conference, Batuman was unsure which funding to apply for as her department only awarded two kinds of international travel grants: for presenting a conference paper, the recipient was awarded \$1,000; \$2,500 was awarded for field research (111). She acknowledges her needs met the criteria of the first category, but she decided to conduct research while giving a presentation on the double plot of *Anna Karenina* and ended with a brief, if controversial, comparison to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (122). What ensues is a debate between archivists, the conference organizers, and a Rousseau expert, the latter who asks, if Anna represents Alice, and Levin represents the White Rabbit, then who is Vronsky?" (123). The question is one very indicative of a literary field, where analogies and intertextuality often become fodder for hypothetical questions. Feeling the need to respond, Batuman tries to explain that she wasn't suggesting a one-to-one correspondence between every character in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Anna Karenina* (123)." The Rousseau expert takes this to mean that Vronsky could be the White Rabbit. Another voice pipes up with Vronsky is the Mad Hatter!" (123).

Batuman's experiences are not limited to the chaos of the academy. In one of her essays on a summer spent in Samarkand, Batuman pitched a story to *The New Yorker* on a life-size replica of the 1740 House of Ice at the St. Petersburg's Place Square, a reference to *The House of Ice* by Ivan Lazhechnikov (181). The famed publication had published a journalism piece by Batuman and responded that it might be nice to have a 'Postcard from St. Petersburg' about the palace (181). Batuman realized that the editors knew she would be in St. Petersburg for her research studies and did not want to pay for her travel expenses. For neither the first nor last time in my academic career, Grisha Freidin saved the day" (182) and helped her find \$2,000 dollars in departmental funds. Freidin, however, expects Batuman to write a report about the role of Lazhechnikov in the Russian

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cultural imagination, and also take some photographs of a house in Petersburg where Maxim Gorky had once lived” (182).

On a phone call with an editor from *The New Yorker*, he tells Batuman what kind of writing genre is expected to complete the assignment. He did not want a travel piece, but a postcard, a snapshot, with lots of wonderful details” (182). He goes on to explain that she should investigate whether she could interview the person who made the doorknobs. Pressing for more gimmicky details, the editor goes on to suggest she might be able to spend a night inside the ice palace and perhaps write ‘Three a.m. I hear a dog barking” (182). When Batuman informs him that one can rent the palace as a honeymoon suite for three thousand euros, he wonders aloud if he can negotiate a room for a few hundred euros. In her confessional, Batuman writes that she was interested in knowing that, though the magazine wouldn’t reimburse me for the normal hotel, they were willing to spend up to four hundred euros for me to spend a night in an ice palace, listening to the dogs bark” (183).

All of Batuman’s many experiences in academia and writing for prestigious journals like *The New Yorker* emerge as dueling double stories in *The Possessed*. In the meticulously researched love letter to Russian literature, there are sharp moments of the academic struggle and expected labor as we come to understand and recognize all too well. She notes that graduate school was not uncomplicated or a peaceful environment and took a leave of absence before returning to Stanford with a clearer idea on the huge non-novel” (23) she was tasked to write. In the ending pages of the introduction, Batuman again alludes to the glimmers of her specialty study when she shares that her title references Dostoevsky’s weirdest novel, *The Demons*, formerly translated as *The Possessed*, which narrates the descent into madness of a circle of intellectuals in a remote Russian province” (23). She compares this descent of madness as rather analogous to her own experiences in graduate school.

But this madness seems excused, especially when Batuman offers a more negative picture of creative writing institutions and outlets, as if both are different from the university.

### **Conclusion: The Question of Genre in Writing**

How writing is learned through particular institutions reveal their structural similarities more than assumed differences, especially in acknowledging how genres and forms of writings are institutionalized. Bulgarian-French historian and philosopher Tzvetan Todorov postulates that genres are classes of texts. But such a definition only partially disguises its tautological character behind the plurality of the terms in question. Genres are classes; the literary is textual” (Todorov 161). Todorov is not interested in coining new concepts or offering clean definitions of any genres, and instead focuses his attention on its institutional element. A genre exists as a factor of an institution so that they function as horizons of expectation” and as models of writing for authors (163). Genres result from speech acts, yet there is no expected corollary sentence that speech acts produce literary genres. Todorov explains that society chooses and codifies the acts that most closely correspond to its ideology,” which is why the existence of certain genres in a society and their absence in another reveal a central ideology” (164). Choosing which genre to abide by depends upon the ideological framework in which it operates” (164).

In the polemic *How Institutions Think*, social anthropologist Mary Douglas reflects upon our tendency to anthropomorphize institutions and reminds us that though we tend to refer to institutions as if they are humans, they are incapable of building themselves or thinking independently. Institutions are constructed by humans with specific ideologies, which provide a solid shape to prove their legitimacy and credibility. Language plays a role in the maintenance of institutions, or what Roland Barthes calls encratic language,” which is a language that circulates and spreads under the protection of power. The power is through its repetition throughout all official

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institutions. These institutions repeat and mimic the same structure, the same meaning, and, very often, the same words (Barthes 40).

With respect to the ideological roots of genre and many other features, MFA programs and PhD programs are not completely different from each other. They rely on a deference to authority and power, and a contested canonical understanding of theory whether in the form of craft” or academic theory.” Any assumed differences in a program or a genre may simply be an ideal. In a piece declaring ideal theory as ideology, Charles W. Mills warns that basing our reasoning -- philosophical, sociological—on an ideal case hides or obscures real world harms and thereby perpetuates harmful ideology.

If there is an institutional element in Batuman’s view, it is through the restricted window that research and scholars collaborate through their shared love of written texts. Missing in this ideal are individual persons who write and analyze but are limited by their political situatedness and lack of actual support. hooks reminds us that there are many who are outside of the academy who practice theorizing without ever knowing/possessing the term” (hooks 62). She, too, is swift to point out that there are individuals who may employ theoretical and radical terms and are not necessarily users of these very terms. If they do employ these terms, the privileged act of naming often affords those in power access to modes of communication and enables them to project an interpretation, a definition, a description of their work and actions, that may not be accurate” (62).

Where hooks has explicitly stated that theorizing must be connected to action, practice, critical reflection, and lived experience, Batuman’s experiential writing seems disconnected from the lives of texts unless used as anecdotes and analogies. Her relationships with peers become separate entities in the longer literary analyses. The collaboration that Batuman sought from theory is not directly linked to her departmental professors or peers, but in her weaving of supplementary textual artifacts. In her final essay, which shares the title of the collection, she focuses on Dostoevsky’s

novel. So is *Demons* really just a botched novel, an aggregation of mutilated drafts, lacking any unified meaning?” (Batuman 263). She provides a negative answer. Graduate school taught me this. It taught me through both theory and practice” (263). But for Batuman, the theory and practice come from textual and literary discourse, within the academy, institutionalized magazines, and creative writing workshops. There is not a sense of full satisfaction in Batuman’s experiences between institutions and between writing for two genres, but she holds out hope that her love for literature can help navigate the questions she seeks to ask. If I could start over today, I would choose literature again. If the answers exist in the world or in the universe, I still think that’s where we’re going to find them,” she concludes (290).

Theory and literary value do not belong solely to the university or the Ivory Tower, nor should writing programs shy away from its allegedly inaccessible language. Doing so allows particular scholars and writers who, perhaps inaccurately extract concepts, to separate theory from society and lived experience. Though Batuman may have, in some way, successfully defied genre and institutional norms, powerful institutions maintain a steely grasp on their standards for particular forms of genre writing, which then repurposes the mixed metaphor and imagery of the Ivory Tower. To overcome this, love of theory and of the text may not be enough.

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