

Literary Careers: Breaks and Stalls

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Volume 3 Issue 3 (September 2001) Article 3**W. Ray Crozier,****"Literary Careers: Breaks and Stalls"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol3/iss3/3>>

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Abstract: In his article, "Literary Careers: Breaks and Stalls," W. Ray Crozier argues that biographical evidence points to considerable individual variation in writers' output over the life span even when allowance is made for longevity and length of writing career. This issue has been neglected by psychological accounts of creativity. Crozier outlines a theoretical framework for understanding variation in terms of an "artistic career." This is conceptualised as a sequence of projects, the success of which are influenced by intra-project factors such as the rewardingness and difficulties of literary projects and extra-project factors such as work pressures, poverty, and competing demands on time. This account is compared to an explanation proposed by Dean Keith Simonton, which emphasises the reduction over time in the potential to produce new work. The framework is applied to the analysis of biographical material on six writers of fiction who were all critically acclaimed writers who lived until at least their eightieth year but who were among the least productive in a large sample of twentieth-century British novelists.

W. Ray CROZIER

Literary Careers: Breaks and Stalls

A telling feature of creative endeavour is that it can be sustained over a lifetime. It is rare for an artist to produce only a single work; more typically, one work follows another, or one or more works are in progress at any one time. This process can continue until interrupted by incapacity or death. However, despite a long history of psychological research into the personal characteristics of artists and the processes thought to be involved in the production of artworks (see Eysenck), the study of the life course of creative endeavour has received scant attention. Little is known about the course of artists' lives or about the factors that influence the production of work across the life span. There has been some research into productivity across the life span. W. Dennis and Dean Keith Simonton have drawn upon aggregate data to provide statistical analyses of rates of productivity in diverse scientific and artistic domains, including the production of literary work (for Simonton, see <<http://psyweb.ucdavis.edu/simonton/>>[inactive]). This research has drawn upon biographical material to demonstrate that the production of works has a characteristic distribution, rising quickly to a peak followed by a long and steady decline. It concentrates on artists who have lived until they were eighty, arguing that this provides an estimate of output unconstrained by premature death. It also focuses on the most eminent within domains, relying upon expert judgments (e.g., made by art historians, literary critics, and so on) to establish eminence.

Research of this nature deals with aggregate data and general trends and it devotes little attention to individual cases or to differences among artists. It focuses on what can be counted, for example the output of writers at different stages in life. It pays no attention to differences between works in quality, however defined. It also neglects the magnitude of a work, for example, the word count of books. Nevertheless, writers can work slowly on relatively short works (for example, Jean Rhys and Antonia White, discussed below) whereas others produce enormous volumes in quick succession (for example, John Cowper Powys: <<http://home.iae.nl/users/tklijn/Index.htm>>). It might also be the case that some writers concentrate on producing a small number of novels, each of which possibly requires years of work before it is completed. Consider James Joyce who spent eight years on *Ulysses* and 16 years on *Finnegan's Wake* (see *The International James Joyce Foundation* at <<http://english.osu.edu/organizations/ijjf/>>).

Whereas there do seem to be systematic trends in the relationship between age and productivity, there is also considerable individual variation in productivity. I found this in an analysis of biographical information on a sample of 191 twentieth-century British novelists (Crozier, 1999). There was a wide range in the number of works of fiction produced by the writers in the sample (a range from 1 to 96 works). There was also variation in a computed index of the annual rate of production, which ranges from one negative value (Robert Tressell's only book, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, was published posthumously) to 2.80, with a mean of 0.50, i.e., an average of one work of fiction published every two years. This index is defined in terms of writing career, that is the period between the date of the writer's first published work and the date of death. If length of life or of writing career is statistically controlled, or comparison is made between writers of equivalent longevity, there is still evidence of considerable individual differences.

How are these differences to be understood? Simonton has explained age changes in productivity in terms of a two-step model. Each creator has a certain level of "creative potential" which is defined in terms of the total number of works he or she could produce in their lifetime in the absence of restricting factors, such as premature termination of production or death. This potential is translated into "creative ideation" and, in the second step, this is turned into novels, symphonies, paintings, and so on. Eysenck has offered a critique of Simonton's model of production on the grounds that it cannot be tested empirically other than showing that, if certain assumptions are made about the values of parameters, a model incorporating creative potential, ideation and productions can predict aggregate data on the distribution of output across the life span. Eysenck argues that the model fits the data because the assumptions are arbitrarily made to maximise fit; the assumptions, he alleges, are not based on theory.

Crozier (1997, 1999) has argued for analysing production in terms of the concept of the "artistic career." A career is shaped by individual talents, skills and preferences and also by social forces. It comprises a series of "projects." Central to career in this sense is the artist's *relationship* with his or her work, as the artist explores his or her current preoccupations in a project. A project is defined as a developing relationship between an artist and his or her work that is characterised by exploration of a selection of themes, styles, materials that is realised in sketches/designs/models/drafts. These are translated into products that enter the public, critical and commercial domains. This relationship seems to have two significant characteristics: First, it is a dialogue between the artist and the work; second, the relationship seems to have an objective or "third person" quality that has an existence outside the artist (see Crozier and Greenhalgh).

The development of projects and transitions between them are the key elements in a career and they are influenced by factors that are inherent in the project or are extrinsic to it. Intrinsic factors include the "rewardingness" of a project as perceived by the artist, i.e., the relationship is unrewarding, does not meet his or her needs, and so on. Artists will abandon projects that are unrewarding unless no alternative is available; they will be reluctant to do so to the extent that time and effort have already been invested in the project. The difficulty of a project is another factor, one that may delay the production of work, lead the artist to abandon it for periods, and so on. The project is undertaken within parameters set by its social context. The context can impact on the project itself, by furnishing life experiences that can play a part in the work. Or it can hinder the project by intruding upon it, by making it difficult to sustain work. The difficulties can be practical, of time or space, or they can be psychological, intruding in a more emotional way. Extrinsic factors include disruptive life-events, availability of financial support, availability of social/emotional support, access to critical feedback, and pressures to produce work or meet deadlines. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has examined the contribution of some of these factors, particularly social support networks, to creative success (see <http://www.ccp.uchicago.edu/faculty/Mihaly_Csikszentmihalyi/html/>[inactive]). The distinction between extra-project factors and intra-project factors may be a crude one since the dynamic interplay between these has to be taken into account.

Writers who have very low rates of productivity are of particular relevance to explanations in terms of "creative potential" and "artistic career." Simonton's model implies that writers who have the lowest rate of productivity and whose output has not been curtailed by early death have had a low initial potential since the two translation steps in the creative process are assumed to be a function of available potential. An account in terms of career implies that there are breaks in careers due to extra-project or intra-project factors. Careful reading of biographical and bibliographical material should provide insight into the nature of these "career breaks."

The writers are selected from the sample studied by Crozier (1999). The original sample was subdivided into 79 eminent writers and 112 less eminent writers on the basis of procedures set out by Simonton that draw upon the frequency and extent of references in published surveys of literature in order to identify the most eminent artists. A further selection was made of those eminent writers who were octogenarians. Within this sample of 27 writers there was also a wide range of published fiction, from 5 to 89 works, and the annual rate of productivity ranged from 0.10 (Antonia White; one published work every ten years, on average) to 1.22 (P.G. Woodehouse, who produced more than one book every year). The least productive writers fell below the 25th percentile of this small sample. In the analysis, the data of the eight writers -- with details of the age of their first novel, total works of fiction published, and their rate of output -- result with ranges from 0.10 to 0.22 and can be compared with rates between 0.54 and 1.22 among the most productive group. The question addressed is why these writers -- who produced works that have received critical attention and look likely to join the canon of English literature -- produced so little relative to other writers, given their longevity. The first step is to look more closely at the pattern of output of this sample. The analysis of the data with intervals between books suggests that there are periods in a writer's life when he/she is producing at a rate comparable to peers. There are also long gaps, either between books or between their last published book and death. The next section looks in more detail at some of these "gaps" by considering each of the writers in turn. It omits Hudson

and Warner for whom I am as yet unable to find sufficient biographical information. In each case discussion focuses on lengthy gaps between successive publications and tries to understand these in terms of intra-project and extra-project factors.

Case Studies

E.M. Forster (1879-1970): In Forster's case the gap in his writing was never closed, since he published no fiction in the last forty-two years of his life despite having established a considerable reputation by the age of 31. Forster remained prolific in other forms of literary output and there has been much speculation about his reasons for abandoning fiction. Writing in 1966 (while Forster was still alive) Stone asks the question, "Why did the springs dry up?" (11). He answers his question in terms of social changes, specifically in the countryside and in the family, and suggests that Forster could not deal with these in fiction: Foster wrote, "I don't fret over the changes in the world I grew up in. But I can't handle them" (letter to Jonathan Spence, 1959, qtd. in Stone, 12). A related argument is that Forster was ill at ease with "modernist" developments in the novel. One reason discussed openly after Forster's death is his homosexuality and the impossibility of publishing a novel with this theme, *Maurice*, which he had written by 1914 but was only published after his death in 1971. Page also suggests that Forster was dissatisfied with the issues of his early novels in that they were restricted to examining the relationships between men and women (13). However, Page argues that Forster's difficulties with his writing were already evident at the time of *Howard's End* and that he struggled with *A Passage to India*, the last of his novels to be published in his lifetime. For example, he began *A Passage to India* in 1912 but it was not published until 1924, and there is a gap of 14 years before the 'springs dry up' completely. Furbank also traces Forster's difficulties to this time. Although Forster was apparently at the height of his powers he was unsettled until he realised that he had wanted to deal with homosexuality in his writing. He took only three months to complete the first draft of *Maurice* but he never considered attempting to publish it in his lifetime. He showed it to friends and revised it several times, for example in 1919, 1932, and 1959, and made arrangements for its posthumous publication. It was published in the year after his death. The difficulties faced by Forster are with the project, specifically with what we term its rewardingness. It no longer met his needs or fulfilled his ambitions. It would be unlikely that another project would be rewarding when he had one in good shape but not publishable since any work on the topic of homosexuality would be prohibited. There are hints that he experienced difficulties with earlier projects but these may be anticipations of the factors that were to bring his creative writing to a premature halt.

Rosamond Lehmann (1901-1990) established a critical reputation with four novels written between the ages of 26 and 35 and she continued to publish work at regular intervals until she was devastated by the sudden death in Indonesia of her daughter, when Lehmann was 57 and her daughter was 24. Thereafter she was unable to work at fiction; her autobiographical essay, *The Swan in the Evening* describes her inability to produce another book, the "strangling spiritual blockage" and the "well nigh total seize-up in such powers of self-expression as I have" (89). The essay provides an account of the researches she carried out into psychical and mystical experiences and paranormal phenomena and which were to preoccupy her for the rest of her life. This case seems to provide the clearest example of the profound impact of an extra-project factor upon a writer's work. Nevertheless, Lehmann was unable or unwilling to turn this intense emotional experience into a fictional project; rather, her psychical research became the principal project of her life.

Jean Rhys (1890-1979): After the publication of four novels between 1928 and 1939 Rhys did not produce another until 1966 with the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. During and after the Second World War she lived in obscurity and poverty, the incidents in her life including imprisonment, health problems, and the death of two husbands. She lived in isolation from literary circles; indeed, many in the literary world believed that she was dead. She eventually finished *Wide Sargasso Sea* after she had been "rediscovered" in 1957 by Francis Wyndham whose support, encouragement, and critical feedback and advice were crucial for its completion. Rhys spent many years on the book and we can trace its development through her letters (see Rhys). She claimed to have written about half of the book in 1939 and again in 1945 (39). In 1957 she was still working on it,

stating that she could almost have dictated the whole book as it had been in her mind for so many years (143). She expected to submit the manuscript within six to nine months, definitely in 1958 (147-48, 151). In 1959 she believed it to be almost finished but her letters reveal that this "first draft" had only the "skeleton" of the story and was "something definite to go on" and that there were major problems with the draft that had to be overcome (159). In 1961 she was promising Wyndham the first part of the story and admitting the novel was incomplete; it was not to be completed until 1966. We can trace the interplay between extraneous and intra-project factors in her letters. The slow progress was due in part to external factors -- her husband's illness, her financial problems, and the difficulties of their life in a remote part of Cornwall, particularly the coldness in winter (172). She wrote that she had received setbacks in the first year of writing, when she had a good grasp of the book, which prevented her from making progress at that time. She writes again and again that if she could have just a short period of peace she could finish it (178). Yet clearly this is not the whole story as she had also encountered adverse life circumstances while she was working on her earlier novels. The letters also reveal her problems with the project itself, of how it turned out to be much more difficult than she had anticipated and required several drafts (172). She expressed dissatisfaction with the material she had already written (178). She was reluctant to release the manuscript even when it was near completion and parts had already been published in a literary magazine (Smith, xxvi). Why did Rhys take so long to complete the book from its inception and from the time she began to work seriously on it? Clearly, many factors contribute to this, but her letters give the impression that this was a more ambitious and difficult project than any of her previous novels and it was the combination of this, her domestic circumstances, and perhaps her distance from literary support that was crucial. Again and again in her letters she acknowledges the crucial role of the feedback she received from Wyndham. In terms of her artistic career Rhys was committed to this particular project, she believed it was the most important project she had embarked upon, and she did not consider any alternative. She pursued this despite severe extra-project obstacles and problems with the work itself that were aggravated by these obstacles. The problems with the project related to its difficulties not to its rewardingness.

J.R. Tolkien (1892-1973): Tolkien began *The Silmarillion* in 1917 before either of his best-known works *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. He struggled with this project for the rest of his life and it was only completed after his death (by his son) some 56 years after its genesis and published posthumously. He had submitted it to his publishers after the commercial success of *The Hobbit*, but they were unhappy about proceeding with it, as they wanted a book that would aim at the children's market and build on the success of *The Hobbit*. Even when he switched publishers in 1950, the new publisher was sceptical about *The Silmarillion*. When he tried to devote time to it after his retirement from academic life he was faced with extensive commitments arising from the success of his earlier publications. This gave rise to discontinuities and "a breaking of threads in his work which delayed achievement and frustrated him more and more" (Carpenter, 240). He found it difficult to concentrate on his writing and missed the company of those who had previously provided a critical audience for his work (the "inklings," C.S. Lewis and others who met regularly in the Eagle and Child public house in Oxford). When he did manage to spend time on the work he found it difficult to make progress not least because the book had been so long in the writing, for example there existed several different and inconsistent versions of each chapter. Eventually, the death of his wife and his own infirmity made it impossible for him to complete the book. Despite his previous critical and commercial success in publication and the working conditions that seemed to favour his work, Tolkien spent many years in an unsuccessful attempt to complete a project that was very important to him, more important than the books that established his reputation. In part this was due to the lukewarm reaction of publishers, in part to external pressure. Eventually a combination of his working methods and the inability to find the conditions in which to write brought about his failure.

Rebecca West (1892-1983): There is a gap in fiction writing of 21 years before Rebecca West published the novel that has proved her most popular, *The Fountain Overflows* (1956), the first of three autobiographical novels, the final two being published posthumously. However, this gap is

explicable in the context of West's lifelong interests in philosophy and politics, and she published extensively in literary criticism and journalism as well as on historical and philosophical themes. During this period she wrote an acclaimed two-volume 500,000-word historical and political study of Yugoslavia, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (a work she described as "a preternatural event in my life" [Scott, 169] and considered by some her masterpiece [see, e.g., Hynes]). That she was able to pursue her interests in Yugoslavia and devote so much time to "the great financial sacrifice" of such a large non-commercial venture was due to the financial security she had achieved by writing columns for national newspapers in Britain and the US. In the same period she wrote a highly regarded study of treason, *The Meaning of Treason* (1947). It would seem that she turned away from the project of the novel to a more rewarding non-fictional one. Nevertheless, some difficulties clearly surrounded *The Fountain Overflows*. West described in a letter of 1955 how what was intended to be a long short story grew into a project of 400,000 words (Scott, 290). It appeared ten years after it was promised to the publishers and the intended sequels never appeared in the remaining 27 years of her life (two novels based on her manuscripts were published posthumously). According to her biographer the sequel was virtually finished the following year but she did not send the manuscript to the publisher (Glendenning, 207). West attributed the delays to "domestic interruptions" (Scott, 304), to illness and anxieties about the contents of a book published by her son. In a later letter (Scott, 351) she mentioned the technical difficulties posed by the unfinished novel (*This Real Night*). She did subsequently publish a non-autobiographical novel about treachery, *The Birds Fall Down*, begun by 1945 and published in 1966, which was also the focus of her journalism at the time and less autobiographical than the uncompleted novels. The gap in West's fiction output seems due to a complex set of factors. Although the time spent on *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* was productive, fiction was important to her and she returned to it with a sense of what the nature of the project should be, the exploration of themes connected with childhood. Her failure to complete the work may be due to difficulties with extensive commitments she faced, many of them arising from her political interests and journalism, and from the success of the book on Yugoslavia. Her case resembles that of Tolkien in terms of pressures that interfere with the production of fiction.

Antonia White (1899-1979): White has an interval of 17 years before her first and second novels and did not produce any in the last 26 years of her life. She illustrates most clearly the difficulty with a project that is commonly known as "writer's block." Despite her continuing efforts she was unsuccessful in bringing work to completion. She was unable to write, even when she did find the time and space to do so; she describes in her diaries spending over five hours trying, without success, to improve two sentences, and reported that this happened over and over again (Dunn, 372). Dunn reports that White's desk could be covered with up to fifteen versions of a first paragraph, each crossed out and re-written over and over (410). We can contrast this with the feverish and goal-directed activity of her translation work at the same time. She strove tirelessly to meet deadlines, resorting to barbiturates to complete the task. Indeed, she found this activity a respite from the difficulties she experienced with her creative work particularly as it assuaged her sense of guilt about failing to write, since she approached her writing almost as a religious duty. Dunn offers an explanation of White's "block," relating it to the strong autobiographical themes of the novels. White believed that she was unable to invent, but had to draw directly upon her own experience. Her emotional life was a disturbed one and she suffered from psychological illness for most of her life including a spell in a mental hospital when she was 22 years old (this was the topic of her most regarded novel, *Beyond the Glass*). Her emotional life was dominated by her intense and erotically charged relationship with her father. Entries in her autobiography, as well as her diaries, letters, and fiction indicate her awareness of the erotic dimension of the relationship, and this pre-occupied her long after her father's death. It is the principal theme of her novel *The Lost Traveller*, which took 13 years to write, and where the central character is on the verge of adulthood and is unable to find fulfilment in her first adult relationship. Dunn suggests that White was unable to deal with autobiographical material dealing with her adult life. She points out that this was the theme that White attempted unsuccessfully to address in her work. She also presents as evidence in support of this thesis that White was unable to find sexual fulfilment with any of her three hus-

bands or many lovers, and she argues that this too was connected with the influence of her father. Whether or not this particular explanation is accepted, the gaps in White's oeuvre do seem to be related to the difficulties posed by an established project.

Discussion

The first point to be acknowledged about this analysis is that it is based on a tiny sample of writers. This is too small to permit meaningful parameter estimation and model fitting of the kind advocated by Simonton. In terms of investigation of artistic careers, it runs the risk of finding that there are entirely unconnected reasons for their low rate of publication within this group of writers. It is possible that writing was terminated by infirmity rather than by factors to do with creativity in itself. The sample is also a biased one. It was drawn from a handbook of twentieth century writers (Parker) that was intended to include all those writers of fiction who had been born or resident in Britain. This source is biased towards the artistic "canon," and under-represents more "popular" writers. The basis for admitting writers to this canon is perhaps an arbitrary one, and Peter Swirski has argued that we should be alert to high quality writing whether it is highbrow or popular (see <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss4/4/>>).

Notwithstanding these limitations of the sample, there are patterns in the data. It does not seem to be the case that these writers are characterised by a slow working rate or that a lengthy gap necessarily signals a waning of abilities. For example, West was prolific in many styles of writing throughout her long life and in the gap in her fiction writing she produced a highly original piece of non-fiction, drawing upon different genres to produce something innovative, a work that is considered by many as her masterpiece. Furthermore, the lengthy gap heralded what some commentators regard as the most creative period in her fiction writing, one that shows difficulty in bringing work to fruition but no decline in its eventual quality. Although Tolkien, Forster, White, West, and Lehmann all turned away from the novel for long periods of time they remained active in other forms of writing, whether this was scholarly work, criticism, journalism, or translation. In terms of artistic careers a low level of creativity would correspond to an artist's inability to find, develop or sustain a suitable project, for example by working in well-established channels and conventions without being able to challenge or develop these into something richer, or simply by running out of things to say, repeating oneself or relying on hitherto successful formulae. This is not true of the writers discussed here. There is no doubt that personal qualities and training are necessary for a creative career but they are not sufficient; other conditions have to be met. The task of psychological theory is to understand the complex interactions between these qualities and conditions. Often a metaphor is helpful for grasping complex issues, and it is our contention that the notion of a "career" defined in terms of projects captures the goal-directed nature of artistic work while suggesting questions to ask about creative activity.

The picture that emerges in these case studies is of writers who are highly committed to literary careers and who have spells when they are just as productive as more prolific writers. This progress is disrupted in various ways, sometimes for many years or, in the case of Forster, for the rest of his life. In some cases, this process can be understood in terms of the satisfaction gained from the project, its rewardingness. Artists do change direction, styles, or media. Forster abandoned the novel because he could not address the issues that were important to him. West turned to non-fiction in order to explore philosophical issues that had concerned her all her adult life. Lehmann's fictional output was brought to a halt by a devastating emotional experience, but she did not stop writing or researching; she could not address the issues she wished through fiction, and in this sense her career shares something with that of Forster. On the other hand, West returned to fiction when she found a project in an autobiographical exploration of her life, and consequently a small-scale project turned into a large one. In other cases, the writer has a clear sense of what the project is to be, but has difficulties in working on it. White provides a clear example of this, believing herself unable to write on non-autobiographical matters but facing an emotional block in dealing with post-childhood personal material. Dunn offers a plausible explanation of this in terms of White's relationship with her father. Although extrinsic conditions were in place and White was able to produce other kinds of writing, she was unable to complete her project and unwilling to change it. Rhys and Tolkien struggled over many years with technical aspects of their

projects; these were much more difficult than they anticipated. In both cases these difficulties were augmented by extra-project factors, poverty, illness, and demanding personal relationships in the case of Rhys and the burden of other types of work in Tolkien's case. Both writers exemplify the point about supportive relationships made by Csikszentmihalyi. In later life Tolkien lacked the critical support offered by fellow 'inklings' that had meant so much to him while writing *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. Rhys was able to bring *Wide Sargasso Sea* to completion with the constructive critical support offered by Wyndham.

What is the relationship between factors intrinsic and extrinsic to the project? We have noted examples of poverty (Rhys) and physical illness (Rhys, Tolkien) and mental illness (White) interrupting work. One could argue that the legal position of gay men at the time, an extrinsic factor, affected Forster's development as a writer, since publication of *Maurice* might have produced conditions conducive to his developing a project. However, it seems to be true of this tiny sample that intrinsic factors outweigh extrinsic ones, even in the case of Rhys who suffered most deprivation in her life. This reflects the strong commitment to art demonstrated by all the writers. None turned their back on exploring experience through writing, even if this were to take the form of literary criticism (Forster), or works of philosophy and political ideas (West) or mysticism and spiritualism (Lehmann). Many of these works have proved of lasting interest, for example Lehmann's late autobiographical essay *The Swan in the Evening* has been reprinted five times since its first paperback publication in 1982. I suggest that this small set of case studies illustrates the value of thinking of creative writing across the life span in terms of an artistic career with its contingencies and turning points rather than in terms of notions of slowing down or the "using up" of some fixed amount of creative potential. Each of the careers demonstrates gaps in fiction writing rather than a slow rate of production, and inspection of these gaps is informative about the factors that influence creative writing.

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