

The Creative Impulse in 20th Century America
Justin Hutson
Proposal for Individually Planned Major

Section I

I am treating this proposal not only as a necessary bit of bureaucracy on the road to a degree, but as an opportunity to remind myself of why I love to learn, to write, to read. This document, which is perhaps partly a formality and is certainly part of a form (all those signatures required make it necessarily either a form or a collectable baseball), will serve as more than proposal; I have decided to build upon it, a few bricks here and there, for my own sake, but also, I hope, for yours.

The Creative Impulse in 20th Century America

PRELUDE:

Firstly, I might as well throw caution to the rising, relentless winds and say it plain: I want to write.

What do I want to write about?

I'll tell you.

I want to write critically, on literature, on film, on all of the arts; I want to write about culture, about our American culture, about how we came to this point; I want to elucidate the societal, the institutional, the intellectual, the individual forces, which all come together, CRASH, in the perpetual car-wreck which forms and informs (and deforms) our American nation; I want to write about our disjointed and strange, our homogenous and unreflective, our beautiful and violent culture;

I want to write history, the history we all think we know; I also, however, want to find the secret histories we understand little of, the histories of the oppressed, the marginalized, the exiled and outcast; I want to find the secret threads running through our history which connect, bind, or throttle us;

I want to write the stories of the various players cavorting on the vast stage of our cultural history; I want to tell of the leading men and women, sure, but also of the chorus, the orchestra-pit, and the extras, with their throw-away lines; I want to find and transcribe that background murmur, full of discarded secrets, secrets which might be isolated and eased out from behind the booming clamor of the main actors' scripted lines; I want to write about politics, but as Eksteins defined politics, as the tension between the individual and the whole;

I want to write paeans and obituaries, love letters and investigations, of those individuals who stood in tension with the whole, the best minds of a generation; but this is a "generation" defined not by the time in which they existed but by the manner in which they managed to do so; I want to identify the members, so different, all, and so alike, of a generation of artists and thinkers and writers and speakers which spans the 20th century and beyond, (hell, which spans

all centuries, all nationalities) a generation of border-crossers, boundary-breakers, rebels and exiles; I want to write of the lives they led—bright, bizarre, tragic and triumphant, howling in pain and transcendence—and of the manners in which they died—alone, broken, misused, spent:

I picture Virginia Woolf loading her pockets, laboring to the river's edge; she bulges with stones, she is pregnant with her death-weight; I see Hemingway carefully positioning the gun; I hear the twin, triumphant blasts, as he gratefully lets himself out; I want to write the message that can be divined in the current-tugged movements of Woolf's brown hair, or in the splatter of red that Hem left behind (rage for all the bulls he had admired in his life); there is a meaning even in these, the most desperate of actions, and they can speak to us still, if we will only listen;

I want to write of myself; I want to plumb the depths of identity, to ransack and reinvigorate my soul with words; I want to find my family in words, explore the heroin that nearly destroyed me, the alcohol which robbed me of a father; I want to create, to upend all destruction and hold the dust of eternity in my palm, give birth to some small dancing star of my own; I want to make universes and nebulae and worlds out of my words; I want to write of things that never were, or things that could have been, or might yet be; I want to write about . . .

Put simply, I want to write about what I want to write about.

There. Excuse me, please—I suppose I had to get that out of my system. But now that it's out of the way . . .

1. *Coverage and Definition:*

If the Core program is “designed to foster in students a love of learning and a desire to learn, to think, and to act as reflective, responsible beings throughout their lives” then, I think, my proposed major is very much in keeping with that spirit—save for an added clause, a tacked on emphasis on “the creative impulse.” The creative impulse, as I conceive of it, is really just the transformation, the translation of all that learning and thinking into narrative art forms. It is, ideally, another mode of the “reflective, responsible” act.

I've decided to call the major “The Creative Impulse in 20th Century America” because the terminology allows for the inclusion of several of my passions and interests: the “creative impulse” is, I suppose, the point of intersection for these passions. The first and perhaps the most important application of the term refers to my own creative energies—my impulse and my output, you might say. Literature has been my life-long love. I have long aspired to be a creative writer (by which I mean: to make a living at it), or failing that, to land myself in some line of work which allows me to do creative things with words. (Maybe I'll become a crossword designer, who knows?) A second love, one which I have also pursued actively (at Simon's Rock, from whence I transferred, as well as during a year at the New York Film Academy, which is more of a trade school really, and so does not appear on my transcript), is the love of film, and my passion for creation extends into this arena as well. So, first of all, the creative impulse to which I refer is none other than my own.

In fact, it is important that the impulse to which I refer be primarily my own, because it is the Siamese twin of that other impulse, the one which keeps me reading literature and watching films and analyzing culture and scrutinizing history and thinking critically. These two impulses, in my case, are inseparable. I cannot read a great book without envying the master his craft and wishing to “struggle with him,” as Harold Bloom would put it, by creating my own text to set alongside his. I cannot read a history without imagining the stories that remain untold (that remain uncreated!) of that era. But the “creative impulse” also speaks to my deep, consuming love for consuming (like a good little capitalist)—and analyzing—literature and film. In this sense, not only the impulse to create but the actual product, the creation, is an essential component of my major. Not only this, but the “creative impulse” speaks to my fascination with the lives of artists, and with the circumstances under which *their* works were created. It is not simply my own creative impulse which is of interest here. I can read, for example, *Pale Fire*, and I can delight in Nabokov’s magnificent aesthetic conjuring skills simply for their own sake (do you feel that chill? – the ghost of Wilde just breezed between the lines), but I also revel in seeking the themes and images and words which reveal the artist in the work, which remind us that there *is* a magician on stage, and that *he* is the cause of all those sly tricks and pyrotechnics.

And once we have recognized the artist, we then must be free to examine his times – the circumstances of his life, the conditions under which he lived, the societal pressures (so much greater than him) which he nonetheless shrugged off (or, perhaps, buckled under) that he might create an original, a dazzling, a *personal* work of art. For the story of any artist, of any work of art, is necessarily entangled with the story of the time in which the artist lived and in which the work was created. This is where my experience with history, especially cultural history, will show itself to be a boon. From the broad stance my major posits I am able to look on a film or a work of literature, a play or a painting, not only as a work of art with merit in and of itself, but as a cultural artifact, as a sign or indicator of the context in which it was crafted.

America in the 20th century, because it is the time and place from whence I came and is thus closest to my own processes of creation, is the focus of the historical aspect of my major, but in truth my interests are more trans-global. Give me Borges, Beckett, Bulgakov or Baudelaire. Give me Conrad, Calvino, Cortazar or Celine. I love them all . . . but for the sake of specializing (which I am told is a good thing) American history, culture, and art seemed the logical choice to focus my critical and creative energies on. But our culture is obviously informed by the world outside our borders, and has always been (no matter how hard we may have tried to convince ourselves otherwise at certain moments in our history.) With this logic, modern American history can be made to blur at the edges, can be stretched to encompass subjects of interest from a variety of different climes and different times.

I realize this is long and winding, poetic at best and circumlocutory at worst, so allow me to summarize. My major’s purview is manifold and malleable, but mostly it encompasses:

1. My own artistic, aesthetic, and experiential development—as a creative writer, and to a lesser extent in my attempts at film-making.
2. The analysis of narrative art created by others, especially Americans and specifically literature and film (but not limited to these), and the linking of that analysis with research illuminating the creators themselves.
3. An understanding of the history of America (especially cultural history) in the 20th century and up to the present day—to this very moment, in fact.

2. *Conceptual Linkages between Concentration and Other Subjects:*

English is my area of concentration for two reasons: my love of writing and my love of reading literature. But it should be noted that my “creative” writing has not been confined entirely to the English department. Dr. Maher has worked closely and patiently with me in his history courses, including the one in which I am currently enrolled, allowing me room to experiment with style, voice, and even with historical fiction, in addition to writing traditional, undergraduate-type history papers.

In fact, for Dr. Maher’s “United States History through Film” course last spring, I delivered a paper at the Symposium. It was called “Naked City/Private Eye: Corruption, Identity, and the Myth of Los Angeles in Polanski’s *Chinatown*.” I adopted the voice of a tough-guy sleuth and peppered it with slang from the hard-boiled 30’s. After all, don’t the historian and the detective share notably similar callings? I include this as an example of how the creative impulse can transcend disciplines or genres.

I include the Video production courses as simply another manifestation of my creative impulse and as one more bridge between my studies of film, my studies of literature and my creative writing.

It may seem strange that I have included Dr. Weiss’ “Literature of King Arthur” course, but I did so for a few reasons. One is simply that we read two modern retellings of the Arthur myth. The other, however, is that the literature of King Arthur occupies a wonderful, shady gray area between history and myth, between fact and fiction. Especially in Dr. Taylor’s Biography and Autobiography course, I am learning that the space between fact and fiction is much wider, and allows more space for maneuvering, than I had previously realized. Dr. Weiss says that the meat of the 300 level Core is “the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.” That is history, be it global, national, or personal. That is literature. That is myth and legend. Literature and film are just two different ways of telling those stories.

Any narrative, even the driest history book by the most repressed academic, is a “narrative of the self,” at least on some fundamental level. This is the spirit in which I approach history and literature and film. In my studies of history here at Oglethorpe I have been especially impressed, I think, by my studies of the individual and society, of the solitary figure backlit against the

faceless mass of mobbed-humanity. These individuals are often the isolated voices posing questions or howling dissent. The exile in modern society sometimes occupies this role, a fact that has been pointed out by Edward Said. The exile is often able to see matters from multiple perspectives, for he is not blinded by national pride or regional affinity. The truth of Said's writings has been further driven home for me in my classes on Nabokov and Hitchcock. Both of these men were exiles, and they both captured something essential about the alien American society in which they lived.

In a way, I feel like something of an exile myself. I am not literally an exile from my country, of course, but having lived most of my life in the north I am an outsider in the south. Furthermore, my past problems with heroin addiction caused me to experience acute anomie, and for many years made me an anathema to a hostile American society (we must always remember that the "war on drugs" is also a war on our own citizens.) I try to use the sense of displacement I have felt, and still feel, to my advantage in my studies and in my creative inner life. After living a life of destruction for so long, it seems absolutely fitting, perhaps necessary, that my major would focus on the impulse to create. Perhaps that is the final, hidden meaning of "the creative impulse" – I am trying to create a life for myself from the rubble of my past.

3. Expected and Future Plans:

I expect to hone my writing craft, to experiment and challenge myself. I expect to learn to better analyze and understand literature and film, and to apply these techniques to specific works of literature and film. I expect to attain a fuller knowledge of American history in the 20th century, and the ideas which shaped our modern world. I expect to become more "culturally literate." I expect to further my abilities as a researcher. I expect to gain experience with speaking and reading in public.

After I graduate there is no question that I will pursue my education. It remains to be seen if that education will be formal (i.e. graduate school) or more, shall we say, creative . . . but I will always be learning. Most likely I will attend graduate school, either for Creative Writing, English, or History, or perhaps for Cultural Studies. I am currently employed at a drug-treatment facility for young men, and the possibility remains that I will pursue a career in counseling or Addiction Studies. The future is wide open – and after so many years without one, I hesitate to commit to any single path, any certain destination.

But I will always be striving to learn and create. Of that there can be no doubt.

Section II

Discipline of Concentration: English

- ENG-394 01 Nabokov

- ENG-305 01 Literature of King Arthur
- ENG-394 01 Melville/Pynchon
- ENG-231 110 Biography and Autobiography
- ENG-331 Writing Prose, Fiction and Nonfiction
- ENG-230 American Classics: Tradition & Revision
- ENG-262 Fiction Workshop
- UCENG-4950 Hitchcock

Other Fields of Study:

You will note that there are a few classes which have been placed under multiple categories, occupying spaces of overlap between my concentration and the other fields of study (or even occupying spaces between the discrete “other fields.”) I think, in general, there is much more overlap in the realm of ideas than one might gather simply from glancing at the departmental divisions in a college’s course bulletin. I understand, of course, that it’s necessary for boundaries to be drawn somewhere . . . but boundaries can be transgressed, Said would say, if you have the exile’s plurality of vision.

Creative Writing:

- ENG-231 110 Biography and Autobiography
- ENG-331 Writing Prose, Fiction and Nonfiction
- ENG-262 Fiction Workshop
- THEA-227 Playwriting

History:

- HIS-330 01 U.S History between the WW’s
- HIS-331 145 Age of Affluence: U.S. since 1945
- HIS-131 01 U.S. History since 1865
- HIS-350 02 ST U.S. History through Film

Film Studies:

- HIS-350 02 ST U.S. History through Film
- UCENG-4950 Hitchcock

Video Production:

- SART-390B IS Video Production
- SART-123 Video Prod., Cinematically Speaking

Language Requirement:

- LAT-101 Latin
- LAT-102 Latin