

## SOME ISSUES IN THE TEACHING OF CREATIVE WRITING

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## The Institutional Context

**D**ue to the heavily policed institutional borders between creative writing and criticism or literature, the interrelationship of the two is often obscured. Creative writers, seeing themselves as the keepers of the sacred flame of literature, engage in frequent polemics against the invariably destructive encroachments of theory on creativity, while theorists largely ignore or at best disdain the unselfconscious effusions of authors who refuse to accept the news of their death. This state of affairs has always troubled me, for I have never felt the chasm between my writing and my critical intellect (or that between my emotions and my thoughts on which it is based) that so many seem not only to take for granted but determined to enforce on others. Other literary works, both those with which I have felt affinities and those toward which I've felt great antipathy, have always been both inspirations for and challenges to my own work and the work I aspired to do. Indeed, I never would have considered writing poetry without the impetus of reading deeply in it, wanting to comprehend, apprehend, and wield the power I found in it. Complementarily, criticism and what is sweepingly and too vaguely called "theory" have been crucial in thinking through and thinking anew my writing. Such critical thinking has been central to my development as a writer, and has helped me work through many an impasse in my work.

Most literary academics have no idea how to read a poem, having imbibed the conviction that close reading or textual explication is reactionary or simply passé without ever having informed themselves just what such reading might entail. While poetry writing programs have burgeoned, poetry has fallen by the wayside as an object of literary study in favor of the examination of novels as social documents.

Many literary scholars and theorists believe that writing cannot or should not be taught, that talent is some immeasurable intangible. Many creative writers, some of them teachers of creative

writing, share this belief. Such academics share many students' sense that there is nothing to teach or be taught in a creative writing class, that writing literature, unlike, presumably, analyzing or theorizing it, requires no knowledge or training. Reified notions of innate genius which have been thoroughly deconstructed with regard to the literatures of the past are still too often unselfconsciously applied by writers and by critics to dismiss the possibility of training the writers of future literatures. Some people have a greater aptitude than others for musical composition or performance, for dance, for science or mathematics, yet no one asserts on that basis that these practices cannot be taught. Nor would many argue against the assertion that both those with more of an inclination and those with less of an inclination toward such pursuits can benefit from such education and training. But among both writers and critics, canards like "Keats never took a writing workshop" are freely tossed about, although the most cursory scan of literary history shows that developing writers and artists have always engaged in formal and informal processes of apprenticeship and training, of learning from and being guided by more experienced artists and writers. Perhaps it is the wider availability these days of such apprenticeships to *hoi polloi* to which critics of creative writing programs object. Historically, Keats is one of the few poets born in the working classes to have been able to take advantage of such apprenticeship and patronage.

The idea that writing cannot be taught is a more sophisticated version of the emptied-out pseudo-romanticism pervasive in our society: the assumption that everything one needs is inside one, that thought is the enemy of creativity and of feeling in general, that self-awareness is antithetical to art. As Ann Lauterbach puts it, "There's a familiar split in the notion of what a creative act is. That split, in our culture, involves an idea of creativity as being natural and expressive: a poet has no need to have thought about anything in order to make a poem; the enemy is the analytical. This is a long-standing divisive space, certainly within the academy but also in the culture at large" (Bernstein 196). But self-awareness, the capacity to step back and analyze not just the world but oneself, is what defines us as human, and art is the material embodiment of that self-awareness, of the capacity to separate oneself from one's immediate existence and see it as if from the outside. In that regard, art and science, often conceived of as opposites, have a great deal in common: both are about not taking for granted things as they appear, neither the world nor oneself, about investigating and exploring the universe rather than simply existing in it, about delving through the surfaces of things to understand their true workings. Things are not always what or how they seem, and we are among those things.

In English departments there is little or no attention paid to contemporary literature, except for that literature which can be scrutinized (as distinct from being actually read) as a social symptom, minority and women's literature for the most part. (I must add, though, that as a black gay man who has taught at three different universities and been a student at several more, I have never encountered the caricatured straw institution so prevalent in right-wing anti-academic screeds where minorities are pandered to and Hopi chants are taught instead of Shakespeare.) In most creative writing programs, only contemporary literature is read, and there is a pervasive neglect of the literature of the past (especially of anything written before the twentieth century) among both students and faculty, who tend to consider it irrelevant or even (if they are a bit more intellectually hip) oppressive. This is not to say that individual students may not make efforts to educate themselves, but they are rarely given any context or structure in which to do so, or any incentive for their efforts.

Students in creative writing courses and programs too often expect their work to emerge from the vacuum of inspiration (a vacuum too easily filled with prepackaged formulations and received ideas, from popular music, television, and movies, among other sources); some of their teachers share this expectation. The intention of the writer is conflated with the intention of the poem, because no other context is provided or produced for the work: thus the role of the creative writing teacher is simply to facilitate the student in finding and perhaps refining his or her own voice. This voice, like the self it stands in and expresses, is assumed by students and teachers alike to be pre-existent, needing at most to be shaped and developed. (This is a recent and socially constructed notion of selfhood and subjectivity, one that would have been alien, for example, to Shakespeare.) Each student brings an idiosyncratic and haphazard canon and set of assumptions to the class, basing his or her ideas of poetry on what he or she happens to have read or to have heard on the radio (for many students, popular music lyrics are their main model of poetry). Rarely have they read enough to have made informed choices among the possibilities of writing practice or to have questioned choices made solely on the basis of “what I like.” I have heard creative writing instructors say that they specifically exclude outside reading from their classes in order to focus on student work, as if that work came forth with no connection to anything else that had ever been written.

The unacknowledged assumptions underpinning both student reading and student writing (the reification of taste, the valorization of sincerity, the enshrinement of self-expression) block the development of each individual’s writing, leaving students in cul-de-sacs inescapable precisely because they are invisible. Even students engaged in experimental modes tend not to have read anything outside those modes, any of the work that led up to or even negatively instigated that work. Moreover, they are frequently unwilling or unable to recognize what is still radical (in both senses of the word) or experimental about writers like Sir Thomas Wyatt or Christopher Marlowe, should they take the occasion to read them. Many young writers’ conception of the experimental seems a concoction of received ideas about language poetry (as if other kinds of poetry were made of something other than language) and an attenuated romantic notion of idiosyncratic individualism. Thus such writers are often also ignorant of and uninterested in the historical and intellectual underpinnings of those modes, seeing them only as matters of style. Anti-intellectualism and an indifference to literary history are rife among both mainstream and avant-garde writers.

## **Some Stumbling Blocks in the Creative Writing Classroom**

Students come to creative writing courses with three major impediments to learning the art and craft of writing. First, they tend to assume that because they speak English and are at least officially literate (though some lack basic mechanical writing skills), that they know how to write in the sense of writing poems. This is something one encounters to a much lesser degree in other artistic media: because people don’t work with pigments or clay on a daily basis, they don’t have quite the same conviction that they already know how to paint or how to sculpt. (Though it is true that painting or sculpting students often cultivate a premature sense of their own expertise, of what is or is not relevant for them to know how to do.) But because language is used and abused as a medium of exchange in

everyday life, students (like people in general) find it very difficult to conceive of it as an *artistic* medium.

In a literature course, students usually agree that, for example, the professor has not only read *Paradise Lost* or *King Lear*, but that she or he knows more about these texts than they do, though they often question the point of such knowledge. But students tend to enter creative writing classes unconvinced that there's a subject to be taught at all—the class is simply the forum for them to express what's already inside them, to do what they already know how to do. A common expression of this is the assertion that creative writing is too personal or subjective to judge, criticize, or grade, which makes one wonder why such students have signed up for what is after all a course, one of the bases of which is judging and grading student efforts. Some of the work one has to do in such a class is simply to persuade them that it's a class at all. A student once said to me, "You act like you know more than everyone else in the room." I explained that she would have had cause to complain if I *didn't* know more than they did (at least about the topic at hand).

There is nothing wrong with writing only for oneself, or for one's boyfriend or girlfriend, for example, with writing as a purely private act, a hobby like collecting different mixes of one's favorite song. But when one takes a class in creative writing, one is implicitly bringing one's writing into a public forum, agreeing to its terms of judgment (however various), and placing one's work in the larger context of what has been written and what is being written. One is staking a claim, however contingent, to a place in literary culture, in writing as an artistic practice. That is, one is deciding *not* simply to write for oneself. Indeed, one of the most valuable things that students can learn from a creative writing course is to see their work from the outside, to see it as others see it—that is, as a reader. If a student learns actually to *read* his or her own work (and hopefully that of her or his classmates, and that of the assigned writers), then I have at least in part succeeded.

This leads directly to the second impediment to student learning in creative writing courses: students find it very hard to separate themselves, their thoughts and feelings, or at best the subject of the poem, from the poem on the page, whether it's a poem they have written or a poem someone else has. Indeed, they are often literally unable to see what they have written, because what they meant to say fills their vision to the exclusion of anything else, very much including the particular words that they have put down on the page. To ask "What does this line say on the literal level?" is too often to hear a long explanation of every thought in the student's head related to the line in question *except* those that might illuminate why these particular words occur in this particular order at this particular point in this particular poem. Frequently one receives a narrative of the incident that inspired the poem. These anecdotes can sometimes be more interestingly vivid and specific than the poem, to the extent that I will sometimes tell a student "Write that down. *That's* the poem." Students sometimes don't even know the definitions of the words that they use, and will frequently dismiss such knowledge as unimportant—since poetry means anything that you want it to mean.

Because students look at their own poems and see not the words they have written but the thoughts, emotions, and experiences the word point to, they tend to write poems as captions to pictures that aren't there, providing the meaning of something that isn't present. The meaning is presented without giving the reader the object or situation that would actually be doing the meaning. If they do include images and concrete particulars, they will often not trust those to convey the meaning or message without such commentary or explanation.

This also means that students look not only at their own poems but at those of their classmates and those they may be assigned to read purely in terms of what they mean or (assumedly) intend to mean: they like a poem because they like or identify with its subject matter, and dislike a poem because they don't. The poem is purely a vessel or vehicle of subject matter, any of whose surface complexities are mere impediments to grasping that matter. Any poem that doesn't have an immediately identifiable topic will often be dismissed as pretentious nonsense, except among those students, often those who dress in black and think of themselves as artistic (I used to do this, so I empathize), who have decided that poems aren't supposed to mean anything, that nonsense is the definition of poetry. Or the poem will be forced into a more identifiable mold, as when a student wrote of her poem in response to a reading assignment in John Ashbery that "Ashbery's poems seemed sad, so I wrote a sad poem." As any teacher of creative writing knows, students take criticism of their writing as criticism of themselves in a manner and to a degree which usually doesn't happen in literature courses. To tell a student that her poem about her son, for example, is sentimental can be taken as an attack on her maternal feelings. This also applies to getting students to provide substantive criticism of their peers' work, which often feels mean to them. About the only work that students feel free to criticize is that which the instructor has assigned, since in general the instructor's viewpoint counts for less than anyone else's in the room (after all, he or she is neither a potential date, a dorm-mate, nor a drinking buddy).

To provide students with feedback that is both honest and usable, couched in terms which they can understand, to encourage them to real effort without misleading them about the challenges such effort entails, to point out ways in which their productions are not yet aesthetic objects while not making them feel that they have failed at a task in which they have no hope of success, to point out potentials in their poems without misleading them into thinking that those potentials have already been realized, is a delicate balancing act. Constantly telling students that their work is wonderful (as one former colleague claimed to do, telling them only what she believed they wanted to hear) does them a great educational disservice and makes it more difficult for them to become better writers. Too harshly judging their tentative steps into a realm many of them have never before explored makes them despairing and angry, and ensures that they will never hear anything you say.

This is a problem found at the graduate level as well, where students' personal investment in their work is mixed with a premature professionalization and a conviction that they are already Poets (very much with the capital P): insecurity and vulnerability commingle with arrogance and a sense of entitlement. A former colleague once explained to me that our English department's MFA program was a kind of support group; another former colleague in the same program said in a departmental newsletter that she thought of her writing workshops as therapy sessions. Besides pathologizing creativity as a psychological symptom (the idea of the artist as neurotic is commonplace in our society), this notion of art as therapeutic (though administered by those with no training in therapy) is wholly incompatible with the ideal of an MFA program as a place where students seek to improve, expand, and even challenge their writing and their notions of poetry in a context in which writing *and* reading poetry are taken to be of intrinsic value.

The third impediment to the teaching and learning of creative writing is that students are very resistant to reading. They want to write poems without having read poems (sometimes they profess to actively dislike poetry, or at least not to understand it, while claiming to write poetry themselves), and

frequently their only models for poems are pop song lyrics and greeting cards. Far from understanding that poetry comes out of poetry, or that they can learn from reading the poetry of others, often more than one can learn in a single class, they too often see reading as an impediment to their free self-expression. As a student once asked me, “Why are you making us read all this stuff and stifling our creativity?”

Obviously, students in all courses and all disciplines are often resistant to reading, resistant to having to work at all. Many students see attending classes and doing schoolwork as an imposition on their time. (One student rather disarmingly admitted during a class discussion of Shakespeare’s sonnets that “I can understand this when I work at it, but I don’t like having to work.”) And students, like people in general, frequently value their own notions and opinions more than whatever some book might have to tell them. But creative writing students tend to dislike reading not only out of laziness or self-involvement, but out of a sense that it is actively antithetical to their own creative process. It rarely occurs to them to ask who would want to read the writings of those who are themselves unwilling to read. Indeed, the idea of audience rarely occurs to them at all.

## What Is Creative Writing For?

Many students attend college for no reason other than having been told that is what they should do after high school, and perhaps with the hope that they will make more money if they have a college degree. They tend to feel simultaneously resentful (“Here I am stuck in this stupid class”) and entitled (“I’m not in high school anymore, now I’m an adult”). Students often see creative writing classes as the antithesis to their other classes, in which they are forced to absorb and regurgitate all kinds of information in which they have no personal interest or investment. In a creative writing class, they can be themselves, because anything goes in a poem. (The idea that they might not yet have selves which they can be rarely occurs to them, nor does the idea that selfhood might be a process of becoming, not a fixed state of being.) Concomitantly, they also believe that poetry is too subjective to judge, because it’s all opinion and personal preference.

To acknowledge that personal preference and opinion are always factors while still maintaining that specificity, particularity of image and language, precision, concision, and avoidance of cliché are aspects of all good poetry (as sometimes needs to be pointed out, vagueness is not a style) sometimes seems beyond them, especially since they are convinced and have often been taught that if they think something then it must be true. (One great problem in American education isn’t what students don’t know, but what they know that isn’t true.) My partner has a bumper sticker on his office door that reads “Don’t believe everything you think.” It’s a caution that many might profitably take to heart.

We live in a culture which robs people of social, political, and economic agency, making them feel as if their experience counts for nothing, while simultaneously insisting that everyone’s every passing notion and experience is of supreme importance because it happened to *them*. These two aspects are concomitant with one another, the second offering an imaginary (that is, an ideological) compensation for the first. Much of the boom both in creative writing programs and in slam poetry, performance poetry, stand-up poetry, and the like, has more to do with a cult of the public performance of personality (à la Oprah Winfrey and Jerry Springer), on the one hand, and with the

scarcity of outlets for genuine feeling and expression in our society and an ever-increasing sense of the impotence and insignificance of the individual, on the other hand, than with an interest in poetry as an art form.

The turn to creative writing, and to versions of poetry in particular, is a way of saying “I matter” in a wholly ritualized and conventionalized format, and is wholly understandable (if somewhat misdirected) as such. But again, this has to do not with an interest in the art of poetry, but rather with a sense that poetry is a mode of personal expression unsullied by commerce or social constraints. (And of course poems are shorter and thus apparently easier to write than novels or even short stories, another aspect of their appeal in a society that seeks quick results but shuns effort.) So the recent rise in the popularity of poetry doesn’t contradict poetry’s marginality in our culture any more than does the use of the word “poetry” as an all-purpose honorific: Michael Jordan, as they say, was poetry in motion on the basketball court. I prefer to think that poetry is poetry and basketball is basketball. Indeed, it is one of the functions of art to help us see things as and for themselves.

Canonical poetry, or literary poetry, or Modernist poetry, or post-Modernist poetry, or any poetry grounded in a practice of language and of writing as such, rather than one of personal expressivity and/or identity confirmation, still isn’t much read. Rather, it is disdained as one or another variety of stiff academicism, insular, elitist and oppressive, as opposed to the authentic expression of slam poetry or some similar construction. In this model, creativity is just another commodity which anyone can procure, on credit if necessary.

## A Few Solutions for the Creative Writing Classroom

Making reading, both of contemporary poetry and of the poetic tradition, central to the workshop process expands the realm of poetic possibilities for students by exposing them to work that can challenge their assumptions about what poetry is, can be, and should be. Canonical work, when actually *read*, can be as unsettling and exploratory as explicitly avant-garde work. Indeed, there is no such homogeneous literary past as the singular term canon suggests—the idea of a monolithic canon is a pedagogical fiction, throwing together works that if taken seriously often cancel one another out. Nor is there any such absolute divide between traditional and experimental: if actually *read*, T.S. Eliot’s poems are as radical now as when they were first written. Such avowed opponents as John Hollander and Charles Bernstein, however antithetical their ideological positions (their material positions as holders of endowed academic chairs are remarkably similar), share the conviction that the matter of poems is words and their relations, even if neither is always faithful to that conviction.

By emphasizing and making explicit the contextual and intertextual nature of all writing (did I invent the words I am using now? did I create this syntax or produce this grammar?), and by exposing students to the polymorphous and often contentious nature of literatures in the plural, the integration of critical reading into creative writing helps check the tendency to be influenced at second or third hand by writers whom one has not read, and broadens the field of *conscious* affiliations and repudiations available to each student’s work. As I often remind my students, one can learn as much from seeing what one *doesn’t* want to do as from discovering what one does want to do.

Form, like theory, is a resource, including the resource of restriction: the French poet and critic Paul Valéry wrote that the artist is he whose imagination is stimulated by constraints, and poetry is as much about what is not written as about what is. Whatever forms a student ultimately chooses for his or her own work, she should be aware of as many of the possibilities available to her as possible, and of the uses to which these have been put in the past and are being put now. Of course, in order for this to happen she or he must become aware of the active presence of form as such, and of its inescapability—as Eliot might have said, there is form that works and form that doesn't work, but there is never formlessness, just as true randomness always falls into patterns.

There is no single past or present of any artistic medium, but rather many, both coexisting and competing. It's the duty of every writer to maintain and expand rather than diminish the medium's formal capacities. It's the duty of every teacher of writing to make those capacities as available as possible to his or her students.

In discussing student work, I try to show students that reading critically and reading for pleasure are indissoluble or at least complementary, that the first leads to and enhances the second. When I read a poem, by a student, in a literary journal, in a collection of poems by a single author, or in an anthology, I *want* to enjoy the poem, to immerse myself in the poem's world. The problems that constructive criticism points out are impediments to that enjoyment, literal stumbling blocks to my attempts to approach the poem and immerse myself in it. Thus such criticism is in the service of pleasure, to increase the reader's pleasure in a poem and the clarity and intensity of the experience that the poem provides. This doesn't mean that the poem must be pleasant in its subject matter or even in its techniques, but that it should provide the pleasure of a fully achieved aesthetic accomplishment, whatever its other aims. Nor does this preclude the possibility that a poem can and sometimes should be asked to try to accomplish more than it aims at, that a reader should expect it to provide a richer or deeper experience than its original conception proposes. As the brilliant poet and teacher Michael Anania once told me, one of the tasks of the creative writing instructor is to say, "You've done this very well. What else can you do?"

My creative writing courses emphasize the interdependence of writing and reading, stressing poetry as a practice of *language*. To misquote Mallarmé, poems are made out of words, not out of emotions (though words both entail and embody emotions). Poetry arises from the engagement with poetry; emulation and even imitation are an integral part of writing, as they are of so many other activities. Ezra Pound wrote that technique is the test of a writer's sincerity; T.S. Eliot, that no verse is free for the writer who wants to do a good job. I try to remind students that in poetry language is not a means but an end; that language *itself* can speak, can tell us (including the writer) things we didn't already know. The poem can be a new experience in itself, not simply a commentary on experience.

Making reading and responding to reading central to the poetry workshop provides a common frame of reference and a common vocabulary, especially since even those students who have read some poetry have very rarely read the same poetry. Among other things, this can help students transform personal opinions into considered arguments, by providing a context for their thoughts and reactions. Instead of discussing metaphor in the abstract, for example, we can look at the ways Stevens uses metaphors as figures of thought and landscape in "Credences of Summer" or "The Snow Man." With undergraduates, who have usually read very little, my aim is to introduce them to conceptions of what a poem is and can be outside of the very limited models I have mentioned above. With graduate

students, who often have a prematurely fixed view of the kinds of writers they are and the kinds of writing to which they are willing to respond, my aim is to encourage them to question their preconceptions by introducing them to work that challenges their assumptions of what poetry is or should be.

When having students read more complex or challenging work, I urge them to first allow themselves to *experience* it, immersing themselves in its language and its imagery, before irritably reaching after certainty—to postpone their will to understand or master the poem in favor of exploring the world that the poem offers. Just as in life we often have experiences whose impact is clear but whose meaning only becomes apparent later if at all, so is often the case in reading poems.

In my poetry workshops at least half of the students' poems are responses to assigned readings chosen on the basis of work that will expand their ideas of what is possible in poetry and of work that highlights specific aspects of writing poems (such as Stevens's embodiment of ideas in images, or Ann Lauterbach's use of syntax as a structural principle, or Carl Phillips' distanced, objectified treatment of personal material). I want students to think of the readings as a tool box from which they can draw techniques and resources for their own poems, and also to realize that they can make use of a poet's work (including by clarifying for themselves things they don't want to do) even if they don't necessarily like it (and that a second or third reading of a work may yield different impressions than a first glance will).

Such an engagement with *poems* (as distinct from an abstract notion of poetry) can produce a sense of participation with poetry as a practice (a practice with a history as well as a present) and as a discipline, not simply as a mode of unconsidered or even self-conscious self-expression. It can also help students realize that self-expression is a much more complex thing than it may at first appear, and that clichés and vagueness (not the same thing as ambiguity or well-deployed abstraction) are obstacles to *any* accurate and effective expression. My larger aim is to steer students toward the production of aesthetic objects with an independent existence in the world.

Most students will not become writers, nor do most even aim at that (something that we often forget in our teaching and discussion of creative writing, seeking to reproduce ourselves or our self-image as writers). But such a heightened attention to language can make them better and more involved readers, and will improve all their writing, be it letters or academic essays or business reports. I also hope that it may at least help to make them less susceptible to the seductions of dead and false language that surround us in all areas of life and serve as impediments to actually living, as opposed to merely existing.

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