Bechtel Prize Essay

Can Creative Writing Be Taught?

MARY CAPPELLO, WINNER

I had a fantasy the other day, in some rich moment of unbeckoned inspiration between the classes that I am teaching at the Gorky Institute: That I might ask, by way of an exercise for my creative writing students, that they each turn to the person beside them, raise a wrist, and fingerwise, find one another's pulse. We would give over a few minutes of classtime to this intimacy, as I would ask them, once they felt the other's pulse inside their own fingers, to linger there quietly for a moment more. From here, the fantasy went, we would pose a few questions to ourselves about poetry, like "How and where does one locate the pulse of a poem?" "Is it harder or easier than the exercise they'd just performed?" "What might be the relation between the movements of the invisible percussion that kept us all alive and the poems that they wrote or read?" As I began to take the fantasy seriously, a number of questions posed themselves to me, like whether it would be appropriate to ask the students to cross the thresholds of each others' bodies to make a point about poems; in fact, whether it would be wise to attempt such an exercise in a culture whose etiquettes I had not yet learned. I wondered if the exercise would drive a point home profoundly or, quite the opposite, fall flatly silly. And as I thought about it more and wondered what I might want this exercise to prove, I realized that it no doubt had some personal motives, that maybe what I really wanted to make manifest in my classroom was a mutual confirmation of life in the grievous aftermath of lives lost, lives stolen in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania on September 11th, and now

lives being taken in Afghanistan and the Middle East. Maybe I wanted to communicate to my students the urgency of living, and more particularly, of making life-in-art a wedge of light in the darkness. Perhaps I can admit as well that I might have wanted someone to find my own pulse, to assure me that *I* was alive.

I choose this story as my starting point today in response to what strikes some people as a beguiling question: How does one teach creative writing? Is it really possible to teach creative writing? I want to illustrate first that, though cultures do not generally erect museums to teachers and their pedagogical schema, their imaginative designs, teaching is itself an art. The processes entailed and indeed activated by our pedagogical practices are creative processes as I hope the story of my inspiration—followed by a gambit of context-oriented, self-scrutinizing questions—attests. Maybe, in other words, the question of whether creative writing can be taught is best answered at the outset by the question of whether teaching can be taught. Our presence as educator/artists, our training at pedagogical institutes, and in the classrooms where we learned by imitating our own best teachers, proves that it can and is. Can a person be taught to teach? Yes, though some personalities seem better suited and more enthusiastically drawn to this under-recognized art. Can singing be taught? Painting, sculpture, filmmaking? We accept that they can and must be taught. Why the incredulousless, the bafflement, when it comes to creative writing? I'm afraid that the reason creative writing has trouble being assimilated to our models of that-which-can-be-taught is that the imagination has been rarified, cut off from the grasp of you and me, and considered as the inheritance of a chosen few: the artists, one step away from saints. Their gift came from the gods and they cannot articulate how they do what they do. But it makes them an object of powerful mystery and praise and, occasionally, derision, in which case they are all the more canonized for thei martyrdom to higher truths and to that light that ever exceeds the reach of you and me, blind fools, unteachable doggy-dogs all.

I am a writer, a teacher of writing, a writer, a teacher who was taught how to teach and how to write by people who were teachers and some who were not, by some who were not writers, and some who were. And I guess that's what makes us all the distinct kinds of teachers and writers we become, the array of models at our disposal, what we love in them, and what we come to reject. Nor do I think that our training grounds are all rosy and laced with generosity. We learn to be the teachers and writers we are by our own experiences with even deprivation and harm. By age eight, I knew I wanted to be a teacher because I yearned for a model other than what I'd been given—the unholy Sisters of the Immaculate Heart, a blue-uniformed brigade of angry women who took their frustrations out on their helpless charges, myself and my

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friends at Blessed Virgin Mary Elementary School. I learned from my earliest teachers that punishment, fear, and guilt were cruel and harmful instruments in the classroom. These early teachers, I mean to say, were the best examples to me of what not to do if I became a teacher myself. Those same teachers helped shape the writer I would become because they made in me a girl who had much to say but was kept from saying it and who therefore had to write; a girl who was moved by their own damaged voices to learn how to sing maybe even for them, for the love that lay beneath the hate I thought I felt toward them. Around this same time, in the valley of becoming, on the crest of my turning eight years old, my grandfather, a shoemaker immigrant from Italy, taught me how to play the beloved instrument of his homeland, the mandolin. He gave me my first mandolin, one of several that had traveled with him across the ocean, and he patiently trained my tender fingers to press and pluck and tremolo until together we made duets in a language uncommon to either of us, the music of the Mediterranean. My grandfather was a humble teacher, always playing second to my first mandolin. Where the nuns were overly-aggressive, my grandfather was afraid of his own aggression, with the effect, I think, of not pushing me beyond my own limits to truly learn if a musician I could be. And maybe these two poles are a test for any woman teacher: to find the space between presumedly "female" nurturer and unabashed challenger in the classroom.

Can creative writing be taught? Of course it can in less chancy and more structured ways than my anecdotes have suggested, and that's what I'd like to address now with the obvious proviso that a creative writing classroom is only one of many training grounds for a writer. I think that the questions we need to ask in order to shape a creative writing curriculum are: What kind of teacher of creative writing do I want to be? What kind of classroom do I want to foster and invent? And what kinds of things will students, independent of my influence, need if they are to learn how to write?

As a creative writing teacher, I fashion myself as a Dantesque guide, a companion traveler with the students through the doors of their imaginations. I am not a handholder, though, and students' success in such a class depends largely on a combination of receptiveness and independence: the will to carry out a number of writing, reading, listening and analytically oriented projects on their own. I try to inspire students through the kinds of models that I share with them and by posing pointed questions relative to each new topic for the course. Rather than encourage the idea of a poet as a detached sort of godhead, I try to cultivate the idea of a poet as a craftsperson in pursuit of serious but humble ethical work. I press the students to begin to take responsibility for their utterances by requiring an essay in the first week of the seminar in which they are asked to begin to articulate their aesthetics and poetics:

What they write, why, who their influences are, what their idea of the poet is, etc. Throughout the semester, I provide questions to challenge their assumptions. By semester's end, they must produce a revised aesthetics statement indicative of the new approaches to their craft developed over the course of a few months. Thus, even in the poetry writing class, I require several prose pieces from my students, and one of the guiding principles of the course is the necessity of seeing how one genre overlaps with and influences the other, and how the best writers might have to move among genres. Following the proviso that a writer cannot be made without reading, my creative writing workshops alternate in-depth reading of poetry and poetic theory with workshop sessions in which students critique each other's writing.

I like to think that I do not favor or privilege one kind of writing over another, i.e., I like to help the students to identify the kind of poetry they wish to write rather than the kinds of poetry I might prefer. However, any syllabus reflects the values of its maker. So the reading for my creative writing workshop might have an emphasis on political poetry because in the United States students have by and large been trained toward an un- or apolitical consciousness, or to think of politics as low and art as high, never the twain shall meet. Alternately, I've organized poetry workshops around the idea of re-appropriating form, that is, examining the ways in which poets have taken forms—the diary, the letter, autobiography—and exploited their possibilities, making them do things that they typically do not do in order to incite a change in public discourse. So, for example, last semester one of my students took the form of the Catholic mass and filled it with prayers of his own making that challenged Catholic ideology while retaining the ritualistic power of structure and repetition. Another student worked with epistolary forms to reflect on the disconnect among us in the age of e-mail, where much is chatted about but little said or communicated. At the introductory level, as for example at the institute where I am currently working with students for whom English is a second language, I might organize the course around discrete, manageable units of poetic technique arranged like building blocks to make a poetic edifice by semester's end. Thus we begin with aphorism and image, but by the end of the course I ask students to invent a form, and I tempt them into waters of radically experimental poetry, like the writing of Gertrude Stein. So much can be taught in a meditation on aphorism alone, by considering in what sense aphorisms can be considered a form of poetry. Can aphorism stand alone, or does it need other aphorisms in order for it to "work"? Is an aphorism a sentence, a line, or something else yet again? In my current class at the Gorky Literary Institute, one young poet, Eugeny Pekach, produced the following aphorisms:

Having opened his eyes about eleven in the morning and staring at the washed out blueness of Thursday's sky, he thought: "What can be fine when everything is bad?" But at that moment a second voice inside of him whispered: "And what can be bad when everything's fine?"

The matter is not what kind of dreams you see every night, but the way you tell about them to others.

On a significantly daily and mundane level, students in this course are required to keep an observational journal, an informal notebook of things that they are noticing. The idea is not only to help students to become aware of their perceptual habits, but also to function as a form of practice toward the poetry they will later make. I ask them to choose marginal, unfamiliar, uncanny, or compelling, even banal categories for their notebooks, with the premise that we need to learn to look directly at things, and that maybe we can find the center by looking at a margin, a periphery, an edge of consciousness, by noticing what plays about reality's rim. The idea here is that looking only where we're told to look may not yield the meanings that we need, or the truths we are in search of. By way of example, I share with the students bits of my own Moscow notebook, a record of some of what I've noticed as a newcomer to the city organized in three categories: birds, frames, and light. *Aggressive pigeon grazes an earlobe…White-black raven, plump and ruffled, fat and tattered…Stuffed bird, long-legged and dusty, painted beak like a claw (or a scythe?) in literature office: Charles Wilson Peale revisited…Woman feeding birds, yellow-necked, striped, tiny and friendly, right out of her hand at the Botanical Garden…Bird alighting on pumpkin seeds for sale in market, stealing some seeds…Man at circus, acrobat, dressed in white sparkles, headdress of white eagle, freefalls after hanging from toes into net… In the park near my dwelling what I thought was the cry of a bird was the cry of a boy.* Sharing one's own writing from time to time or writing with the students as some instructors do, is, I think, crucial—lest we reproduce the scenario of my days in Physical Education where an ungainly instructor expected us to achieve perfect balance on a six-inch wide beam without her being able to do so herself.

The best kind of creative writing workshop comes to have the feel of a distinct community of writers and thinkers who take mutual responsibility for the success of the course. Students might be asked to "conspire"—a term I borrow from poet and critic Joan Retallack, who argues that great poetry is a result of conspiration rather than inspiration, community rather than isolation. Students are asked singly to bring in tales or concrete examples of inspirations, and other students take fifteen

minutes to write about what the presentation inspires in them. Some of the best poems my students have written have emerged out of conspiration exercises. The latter can be a healthy complement to fundamental "group" activities—the always unpredictable, sometimes fraught, occasionally joyous, typically stressful and ego-bound creative writing critiquing sessions themselves.

The workshop depends upon students reading one another's poems in advance—two or three in a one-hour class. Poems submitted can be old, new, or in-progress responses to any number of experiments I might give the students weekly, for example: Generate at least five types of metaphoric skies using the principle in James Schuyler's phrase, "mollusc sky." Following David Antin, produce one concave and one convex image to represent a feeling, state, or observation. Create a still-life poem without verbs. Compose a poem that is built upon the re-writing or re-configuring of some truism. Write a poem to the audience. Write a poem in direct conversation with a well-known poem or in imitation of a famous poem. Following Bernadette Mayer, transform a traditional text like the pledge of allegiance to the flag by taking every noun and replacing it with one that is seventh or ninth down from the original one in the dictionary—for instance, the word *honesty* with *honeydew melon.* (Investigate what happens; different dictionaries will produce different results.). Write a poem that intersperses love with landlords or "systematically derange the language: write a work consisting only of prepositional phrases, or, add a gerund to every line of an already existing work." Such experiments are not arbitrarily assigned, but linked with that week's conceptual center.

The group must first develop a working list of criteria for critiquing. Such criteria evolve over time as students learn more about poetry's possibilities, but they might include: Locate the engine of the poem, what moves, motivates, animates it, its pivot point, its heart or center. Locate and describe the poem's music, its heartbeat. What kind of music is this? How does it move us (to think, feel, act)? Describe the poem's internal dynamics: the formal world, the structure or set of doors and rooms (e.g., stanzas) it invites us to enter. Explore the poem's repetitions and interruptions. Consider the poem's audience. What kind of reader does the poem anticipate or produce? What is the poem's genre and how is it working within or without/against the conventions of that genre? Is it a poem yet? What is the poem's politics? Consider the poem's attention to what I call "word auras"—an attention to a word's origins, etymology, its usage, breath, tongue, color, weight—in short, its multivalent vibration in a poem. Poets have the option of sitting silently while the workshop is underway and of only speaking afterwards, or of telling us the aims of their poems and letting themselves be addressed directly by the workshop. Different things are learned with each approach. One or two students are designated as summarizers of the salient points made and questions raised about the poem, and they must present their sum-

mation at the end of this session. (At the very least, students in a poetry workshop must learn each other's names before anything else ensues.) I try to model to the students the simple pedagogical rule of beginning with a complement or commenting on a strength, followed by a weakness, followed by a strength: a kind of tastier evaluative sandwich. But I also work to train my students to begin to see how a text has a life separate from its maker's ego, and even sometimes separate from its original aims, or even what it was trying to represent.

Meanwhile, outside of the classroom, my students are required to attend public readings and report on them, to listen to recordings of poets in the library and report on them, and to revise their writing based on critiquing sessions. All of this material is presented to me at mid-term and at semester's end in two portfolios, giving me a range of responses to evaluate their performance by. From time to time, the semester ends royally with a public poetry reading on campus. The students introduce one another based on what they've learned about one another's writing, and each delivers a few minutes of her/his best compositions. Prior to our reading, I offer them guidance on how publicly to deliver their poems. Such readings can be extraordinary turning points for students—now they have a voice, now they have truly made something worth sharing—and I have to say that it gives me no greater pleasure to fancy myself the silent choir conductor proudly sitting at the back of the room, enjoying the sound of those voices, and their effects on an audience, hearing nuances that I hadn't originally heard, imagining how each poet will develop the range of his or her voice from here.

So, in the end, the poetry writing workshop is a serious space of play, a field in which students are encouraged to develop both conscious and unconscious aspects of their craft, to interrogate the limits of their own writing habits, their forms of trained attentiveness or lack thereof, their skill and sensitivity as listeners. It is a place where they can come to formulate new understandings of the work of poetry in the world, and to learn about poetic forms that they never knew existed. Unlike a course in literature, in which we help students master a body of material, in the poetry workshop we're trying to help students to become none-too rigid masters of themselves and of their own words. And, at the end of an exhilarating creative writing workshop class, I must admit that I sometimes find myself ready to retreat back into the somewhat less vulnerable, less risky, more predictable space of my literature classes….