THE INSTITUTION OF CREATIVE WRITING

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Creative Writing and Its Critics

Early in my teaching career, when a graduate student asked to do a teaching internship in my introductory fiction workshop, the English Department's Director of Graduate Studies was reluctant to approve the request. "Think how it would look on the student's record," he admonished, although the English Department had no policy against interns in creative writing workshops and the student was a talented novelist who hoped to teach creative writing. Though I was fresh enough from the job market to point out that the first question an interviewer would ask was how he would teach a writing workshop, the Director shook his head. "I should think," he said finally, "that you would want the student to intern in a class where there was actually some teaching done."

Although the MFA program this director oversaw was one of the oldest and most respected in the country, I should not have been surprised, for there is a persistent misconception over what happens in a creative writing classroom, even within English departments. In 1934, when Edmund Wilson asked "Is Verse a Dying Technique?," he blamed Romanticism for allowing poetry to dwindle "into a mainly lyric medium" (Gioia, 96). A minor part of the college curriculum, creative writing was not yet cast in the role of the villain, though by 1988, when Joseph Epstein answered Wilson's question with "Who Killed Poetry?," creative writing had become one of higher education's biggest growth industries and the whipping boy that critics, even writers such as Kate Adams, John W. Aldridge, Chris Altacruise, James Atlas, Thomas M. Disch, Dana Gioa, Donald Hall, Greg Kuzma, August Kleinzahler, J.D. McClatchy, David Radavich, and Jed Rasula, just can't leave

alone. In his history of creative writing in higher education, *The Elephants Teach*, D.G. Myers quotes poet and renowned teacher of creative writing Alan Tate: "The academically certified Creative Writer goes out to teach Creative Writing, and produces other Creative Writers who are not writers, but who produce other Creative Writers who are not writers" (146-147). Wendy Bishop quotes her teacher, poet Karl Shapiro: "Creative Writing classes are the pits...Are these rooms holding pens?" (*Teaching Lives*, 242). According to Kingsley Amis, "Everything that has gone wrong with the world since World War II can be summed up in the word 'workshop'" (quoted in Epstein, 16). "Rambo V and chickens pumped full of hormones and antiobiotics are closely related to Waldenbooks and the Iowa Workshop," Kleinzahler insists (35). Hall mistrusts the haste with which the workshop calls upon students to make public their "McPoems" (10-13); others simply fault the workshop for lacking rigor. "The tacit deal that is cut with the students...is that since we can't give most of you a career, we won't ask much of you," alleges Ted Solataroff (quoted in Moxley, xv). Myers, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, and Eve Shelnutt fault the insularity of the programs. But whether questioning the numbers, condemning the workshop, calling for reform, or blaming the demands of professionalism for an excess of publication and the failure of criticism to protect readers from mediocre work, creative writing's critics hold the institution responsible for a national decline in literature.

It is curious that these critics rarely mention the fads and commercial motives of publishers (with the exception of Chis Altacruise, who blames *The New Yorker*); when they do point to publishing, the target is not the corporation but journals subsidized by academia "that address an insular audience of literary professionals, mainly teachers of creative writing and their students" (Gioia, 97). Protesting the classroom's emphasis on craft, which he sees as having robbed poetry of art, James Atlas asserts that "poets must be subsidized by the government and universities in order to survive...coteries will satisfy their longing for recognition, and grants or teaching posts will support them"

(11). Epstein goes even further: "Sometimes it seems as if there isn't a poem written in this nation that isn't subsidized or underwritten by a grant either from a foundation or the government or a teaching salary or a fellowship of one kind or another" (15). Does anyone consider the salaries of the math or biology faculty subsidies? What about the instructors in law and medical schools? No wonder the Director of Graduate Studies believed that there was no teaching in my classroom.

The prevalence of this misconception is implicit in the question we who teach in writing programs are repeatedly asked: Can creative writing be taught? Meaning one of two things: Can creativity be taught? or Isn't creative writing really just anything a creative person puts on paper? Both meanings are predicated on the theory that genius is born and has no need to be tutored. "The essential elements of literary power and beauty are indefinable, illusive; and are not to be communicated by formal instruction," wrote an Amherst professor in 1892 (quoted in Myers, 38), expressing an attitude that underlies the mistrust that many academics still feel for creative writing, though most of today's more vocal critics seem to believe, rather, that only the genius has the right to study craft. Should we restrict the study of music only to students who have exhibited the precocity of Mozart? In her several books on creative writing pedagogy, Wendy Bishop challenges what she saw as the prevailing assumption that only two percent of the students have talent; one of her consistent criticisms of the traditional workshop method is that it addresses the few (the best students) rather than the many, reinforcing a culture of insiders and outsiders. Put on the defense by the implication that they are somehow engaged in a fraudulent pursuit, many writing teachers find themselves agreeing that writing cannot be taught in order to explain that while they may not make better writers, they do make better readers. As the late University of Arkansas professor James Whitehead said, "I teach reading, and I teach reading the way writers read" (Graham, 68).

The same question is seldom asked of studio art programs, which have a longer and distinguished history. As early as the

sixteenth century, art academies existed in Europe, replacing the guilds where artists had previously apprenticed. Rembrandt studied with van Swanenburgh and Pieter Lastman, Constable at London's Royal Academy, Manet with Couture, Picasso at Barcelona's Royal Academy of Art, Thomas Hart Benton at the Art Institute in Chicago, and Jackson Pollock with Thomas Hart Benton. We do not expect composers to write symphonies without any formal training in music. Haydn was educated at St. Stephen's in Vienna, Stravinsky studied with Rimsky-Korsakov, and the prodigies Mozart and Beethoven were taught, rigorously so, by musician fathers. But the creative writing program is relatively new, an exploding phenomenon that scarcely existed before the Iowa Workshop was created in 1942. Today there are more than 400 such programs at American colleges and universities, including B.A., B.F.A., M.A., M.F.A., D.A., and Ph.D. programs. If we like to remember that Robert Frost and William Faulkner never took M.F.A.s, we should also remember that neither had the opportunity. Frost taught himself by imitating the poems of Thomas Hardy; both Faulkner and Hemingway consciously studied the work of Sherwood Anderson; moreover it was Anderson in his role as mentor who advised Faulkner to write about what he knew, that "little patch up there in Mississippi" that we know as Yoknapatawpha County. Flannery O'Connor was a student at the Iowa workshop, as was Tennessee Williams; Peter Taylor studied with John Crowe Ransom at Kenyon College. As Joyce Carol Oates has said, "Inspiration, energy, even genius are rarely enough to make art; prose fiction is also a craft, and craft must be learned, whether by accident or design" (Bailey, 13). The same might be said for poetry, literary nonfiction, and drama. Already a majority of American poets and writers under fifty have studied writing at an institution of higher learning; soon a majority of all our writers will have had some formal academic training.

So it does seem important to ask what we are teaching them and how that relates to the broader mission of a college English Department and, by extension, the humanities. Can creativity be taught? Everyone knows that you cannot make a songbird out of a

hamster, no matter how zealously he squeaks the wheel. Yet the direction of education in the lower grades over the last few decades suggests that we do believe creativity can be fostered and that the effect of a curriculum that stifles rather than fosters is undesirable. Responding to the left-brain orientation of the traditional classroom, cognitive researchers Donald and Judith Sanders insist that educational methods that balance left-brain processes (associated with critical thought) with right-brain processes (associated with creativity) are "critical for efficient, effective classroom learning" (17). The goal of incorporating creativity in elementary and secondary education has not been to raise children to populate M.F.A. programs or to become artists, but to teach them to become more effective thinkers and problem solvers. One cannot make an artist out of a born accountant, nor can we transform someone who has no ear for language or nuance into a writer; few who teach creative writing would pretend that we can instill talent, instinct, or drive. As Madison Smartt Bell has noted, a student cannot come in blank and expect to receive help (Neubauer, 3). These are not required courses; the student needs to bring a desire to write and love for language with her. To a fiction workshop one would hope she also brings some stories she wants to tell.

One of the most widespread misconceptions about the creative writing workshop is that the classes are mere exercises in ego. A writer, however, cannot successfully use his or her talent to the end of art, cannot write honestly and well, without suppressing the pettier parts of ego: students benefit from a workshop if they are willing to check their egos at the door. A student who comes to the workshop only to hear praise and in a spirit of self-congratulation will not learn much, for the simple reason that he or she is not open to learning.

Just as widespread is the misconception that such classes are no more than exercises in group therapy, an idea that grows from the notion that the goal of the classes is not art but self-expression. But self-expression without art is best left to the journal, and the student who comes to a poetry or fiction writing class bent only

on expressing him or herself quickly learns that neither genre is an efficient means, for both require the intermediary of that concrete T.S. Eliot called the objective correlative. Any student who is able to show nothing but the self is likely lacking in the necessary quality John Keats called the negative capability, a term that has come to mean not just the capability of "being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" that Keats attributed to Shakespeare (Holman and Harmon, 314), but also the capability the solipsist most lacks, the capability of putting oneself inside the skin of another, a quality even the most autobiographical writer requires. It is not an infrequent mistake of beginning writers to portray the self looking at the world with all the sensitivity that befits a young artist; what the mature writer has to teach them is that wonder comes not from the self in contemplation of the world but from the world itself and the many mysteries that language may discover and reveal. It may happen that the honesty, the second-guessing about human motivation that good writing requires, will lead the writer to self-discovery, that what he ultimately expresses will be larger than the self with which he started, but the goal is always the work and, no matter how therapeutic the act of writing itself may be, therapy's best left to the therapist.

Although we hear much about helping the young writer find his voice, as if it might be located behind the sofa or underneath a cushion, I don't believe a student writer needs to find his voice as much as he needs to develop the skill to hear and create many. Only a writer with a very limited range speaks in the same voice from work to work. What is far more valuable is for the teacher to point out those places in which the voice the student has chosen for a particular work sounds false.

Yet another common belief about the writing workshop is that there is no discipline, that the criteria for criticism are arbitrary, temperamental, and short-sighted, on the part of the students a case of the blind leading the blind, as Flannery O'Connor put it, and on the part of the teacher self-serving and megalomaniacal. Undoubtedly there are teachers who do try to impose their own

taste and style on their students; Gordon Lish, the former fiction editor for *Esquire* and editor at Knopf who fashioned the early Raymond Carver into more of a minimalist—or perhaps one should say less—than Carver meant to be, is perhaps the most extreme and surely the most famous. On the other hand, Wendy Bishop's criticism of the traditional workshop, which is based on the master-apprentice model of the New Critics, assumes that the master teacher is too interested in his own work to bother with his students'. Undoubtedly there are lazy creative writing teachers, just as there are bad teachers in literature, history, and every other subject. By their own account more creative writing teachers read and think about their students' work with intense concentration in an attempt to discover what is unique in each student and teach to that. And few teachers would turn their beginning students loose as critics without teaching them skills of analysis and interpretation or setting a standard for the nature and tone of the discussion.

My classes still practice a close reading of the text. If the method seems a relic of yesterday's theory, a leftover from the formalism practiced by the New Critics, I would point out that nowhere does a student learn more quickly or concretely one of the fundamental principles of post-structuralist theory, that the text is as much a construct of the reader as the writer, than in a creative writing classroom, where the text is never read as an immutable object but a fluid state of language. As critics, the students' job is to discover what is on or absent from the page that moves or fails to move the story, that engages and guides or fails to engage and guide the reader, that contributes to meaning; as writers they discover what meanings their readers bring with them. For more than two decades colleagues in my department's Ph.D. program observed that the M.F.A. students in their classes were better than the Ph.D. students; they seemed to think it curious if not a shame that the brightest literature students were fooling around in writing workshops instead of training to be scholars. It did not seem to occur to them that the rigorous

attention to the text that the students learned in the workshop might be what made them better students.

Part of my colleagues' concern is that students read the flawed work of their classmates instead of great literature. Though most instructors do use great work to supplement the student poems or stories, there is also value in having students read student work, for great work's air of inevitability tends to obscure the choices that its writers made. It is easier for students to learn how great work is put together, to understand it from the inside, when they have also been presented with the work of writers whose choices are not yet finalized.

But perhaps the greatest mistrust of the writing workshop comes from the fear that it creates a limited and artificial audience and that the result is the "workshop poem" or "workshop story," the kind of soulless exercise in technical competence that Greg Kuzma condemns in "The Catastrophe of Creative Writing," work that Chris Altacruise describes as bearing the hallmarks of committee effort, "emotional restraint and a lack of linguistic idiosyncrasy; no vision, just voice" (18). While it is true that no good or original writing, no writing that is art, will ever come out of a committee, the workshop is neither the primary place where work is generated, nor a repair shop for broken manuscripts. Consensus should not be its goal, for it is not the business of the critics to convince one another or even to convince the writer, despite Altacruise's allegation that the workshop is a Stepford exercise in groupthink. Certainly some students come in with agendas, but a good teacher teaches the critics as much as she teaches the writers. It is not their business to rewrite the work or to make it politically correct; their business is to raise questions and offer informed observation. A good workshop ought to be more descriptive than prescriptive. Art is never a matter of following the rules, no matter whose they are.

The Creative Writing Classroom

What then do we teach and how? Likely there are as many answers as there are teachers, and while I can speak definitively

only for my own classes, my conversations with other writing teachers lead me to believe that more have goals, methods, and styles akin to mine than to the methods of Eve Shelnutt, who does not permit undergraduates to read one another's work and teaches a canon of world literature in the workshop, or Jane Smiley, who neither gives nor permits her students to give praise, suspending value judgments for strictly technical analysis. Some are less democratic than I like to be; others rarely speak and are therefore even more. Most, though not all, forbid the student writer whose work is up from participating in the discussion; a few require the student to respond to the criticism, a practice I find dangerous not only to the classroom dynamic but to the author, for the reason that the student ought to go on listening to what was said after class is over; if a student is called upon to answer his or her critics, the learning process will cease at the door. Some of what the student hears ought to make sense, to benefit his work, later rather than sooner, not by the next class and possibly not even by the end of the semester, for the deeper the questions raised, the longer they are likely to take to answer. Given the opportunity to respond to their critics, most students will try to mount a defense. The classroom is not a courtroom. Nothing voiced in the workshop is binding. Although the student writer is the ultimate judge, she needs to learn to discern the most useful comments and questions, for if she doesn't and goes on to publish, she will be unprepared for and overwhelmed by the cacophony of judgments and advice she will hear from agents, editors, and reviewers.

Though I use student work as the primary text at both undergraduate and graduate levels, my students also read essays about craft and published fiction, both contemporary and traditional, that can raise pertinent issues and teach through example. The more introductory the level of the class, the more preparatory work we do in this regard and the more in-class writing prompts I give, for beginning writers need a workshop that is generative as well as descriptive. I often use a writing textbook in the introductory class, though more as a way of

talking about the elements of fiction—such as point of view, character, plot, setting, imagery, and language—and of building confidence than as a set of instructions. By the time their stories begin to come in, students will have developed a critical vocabulary and begun to learn how to do a close reading. In addition to participating in the classroom dialogue, every student writes a critique to be given to the author (as does the instructor); half of the semester grade is determined by the quality of the critiques, for the goal of the workshop is both to improve the students' skills in crafting fiction and to improve their skills at reading and analysis, to teach them how to read as writers, which is generally not the way they have read in literature classes, which are more likely to stress theme, cultural content, and/or literary theory than technique.

The appropriateness of theory to a writing program is a subject that has been much debated, and I will note here only that poststructuralist theories that stress the instability of language and the cultural ways that language operates outside the control of an individual author are not especially useful to the writer at the time of composition, when the critical apparatus must be muted lest the student deconstruct what he has not yet constructed. The writer's immediate problem is more likely to be how to bring his characters to life and release essential information about their backgrounds at the same time he is trying to get them in and out of rooms than whether the representational in his text fits Roland Barthes's unhealthy "bourgeoise ideology" or lends itself to Derrida's process of kenosis. The problems he faces in composition are always concrete before they can be abstract. As Flannery O'Connor says, "Fiction speaks with character and action, not about character and action...Some people have the notion that you read the story and then climb up out of it into the meaning, but for the fiction writer himself the whole story is the meaning, because it is an experience, not an abstraction" (73). In her essay *On Boxing*, Joyce Carol Oates likens the primitive nature of the sport to birth, death, and erotic love; to watch a match, she says, forces our reluctant acknowledgement "that the most

profound experiences of our lives are physical events—though we believe ourselves to be, and surely are, essentially spiritual beings." (99). Flannery O'Connor was as deeply concerned with the spirit as any writer, but lecturing students on "How the Writer Writes" she noted, "The fact is that the materials of the fiction writer are the humblest...We are made out of dust, and if you scorn getting yourself dusty then you shouldn't try to write fiction. It's not a grand enough job for you" (68).

In the workshop, then, we look at the physical and the spiritual, the technical and the thematic. I can't think of a story that has failed at the spiritual or thematic level without having also failed somewhere at level of the physical and the technical. Yet it is deeply important to keep the spiritual and thematic in mind, lest we encourage mere technical competence. To that end I ask my students to begin their comments with an observation of the whole, a description of what the story seems to be about or wants to be about, of what kind of story it is. On what level of reality does it operate? Is it driven by plot, character, or something else? Does it advance along a line or pivot on a point? What kind of story is it not? Often the students resist—they would rather rush to an image they loved or the place where the action faltered, the sentences that did or didn't "work" for them, because it is easier to talk about a story's parts than it is to talk about its whole, particularly when the story may be complete as a draft but not yet fully realized as a story. The work is always new; we've had at most a few days with it, and though we've read it several times, it may not yet be done turning over in our subconscious apprehension of it, the intuitive level at which we must sense the whole even as we engage in the rational parsing of its parts. But it is crucial that we try.

Several years ago I taught a graduate student whose first story was beautifully written. Language was clearly the writer's greatest strength, though it was also the story's biggest problem, for every sentence was written with the same density and richness, to the effect of a monotone, a lack of variation in the cadence that kept the entire story at the same emotional pitch. There was one line of

dialogue, and I pointed out how welcome it was in a story so much in need of modulation. Later the author complained that I hadn't talked about the language, meaning that I hadn't separated it from the story in order to praise its beauty. "Oh, but I did," I said. "In fact the language was all I talked about." I meant this particularly with regard to his story, which was language-driven at the expense of everything else, though it might be said of any story, for whatever else we seem to be talking about in the writing workshop, we are always talking about language. It is what the work is made of, and as William Gass has observed, to realize that, to realize that stories and the places and people in them are merely made of words, is shocking. My own view of language is gestalt: Though a story may be made of no more (and no less) than its words, the words are a generative force; they have the capacity to create something greater than themselves, an experience, an illusion so palpable and complete that to have it is to feel that one has lived another life.

In an essay on the writers' workshop, the late Frank Conroy speaks of the common ground that must be found by readers and writers in order for a story to work, a zone, he calls it, where their arcs of energy overlap. In order for this zone to exist there must exist meaning, sense, and clarity, the maintaining of which he sees as the primal activity of any writer. Accordingly he places meaning, sense, and clarity at the foundation of a pyramid. On the next tier he places voice, tone, and mood, on the next subtext, on the tier after that metaphor, and finally, perched at the top, where it is held up by all the rest, symbol. A good workshop, he maintains, can save writers a tremendous amount of time if it can correct the common error of trying to write from the top down (Bailey, 82-84).

In the workshop then we speak of craft and technique, but only after we have tried to identify the story's spirit, and always to the end of heightening its art. What is at stake? Do we have enough information? Is this detail significant? We talk about word choices, their nuances. What abstract qualities, what information that is not directly given, is coded into the details and gestures that

are there? What details or gestures fail to have that weight? What about the pacing? The choice of narrator? The tone? These are but a few of the questions that come up. Each work requires different questions, for every work of art is different. Even in the most flawed of beginners' stories, those stories by students who simply do not know what a story is or how one operates, who have no knowledge of fiction's conventions and need to be instructed with such trusty rules as "show don't tell," we are likely to find ourselves face to face with the limits to these old chestnuts if we do not fit them to the particular work. Show don't tell, except that sometimes you must tell; the trick is in knowing when to show and when to tell. And where does such advice encompass the more sophisticated "imply"? Discussion of the students' work requires reading and rereading at full attention and then a great deal of thought and reaching. Always I am looking for the questions that the writer needs to ask himself.

This can be very daunting to the writer, especially the beginner. Indeed many an undergraduate signs up for a workshop expecting to learn the formulas that will enable him to write publishable fiction, and anyone who has ever taught at a writers' conference knows that more people will ask how to get an agent than how to pace a scene, reveal a character, or create a subtext. More than one student has applied to a graduate writing program expecting that it will impart the secret of success, as if he will step into a magic box a wannabe and emerge from it a Writer. Such a student is apt to regard the teacher as something of a priest who has been celebrating the mysteries of the faith behind a rood screen but will now invite the student to the altar. Perhaps the novice even thinks that he will master the handful of basic plot structures, or else he wants a bag of traits to be used in creating memorable characters. Almost certainly he expects to be told what to do with page 6 of his story if page 6 turns out to meet objection. And if the problem on page 6 is mechanical—the reader didn't know the baby died or there needs to be a transition to introduce the flashback—he will get that kind of advice. But revision too is more than following a set of rules, as anyone who

teaches freshman composition or a writing intensive course knows: Mark a student's spelling and grammar and you can expect a revision with corrected mechanics that overlooks all the questions you have raised about structure, style, and content unless you've met with him to stress them.

Many teachers do not edit at the level of the line; yet I find great benefit in teaching students to edit themselves by providing copious example, especially the student who tends to labor action, whose sentences are clogged with unnecessary verbiage, for such lessons help sensitize the student to language, to make her more aware of words and the arcs by which they form sentences and paragraphs. Only a student who understands how to vary the length and depth of those arcs can write with any rhythmic grace or power. "For any writer, the ability to look at a sentence and see what's superfluous, what can be altered, revised, expanded, and, especially, cut, is essential," Francine Prose reports of what she learned from "the generous teacher" of her one fiction class (Prose, 2). Because students use language every day, they are often deadened to its more deliberate use and higher power—which is the difference between writing and the other arts. Many of us believe that the ability to render the visible world with charcoal or paint or to score a symphony is a gift available only to a chosen few. We accept that visual artists and musicians must be trained because most of us are intimidated by the skills those arts require. But how many of us believe ourselves to be inept at language? Yet there is a gift, which is no more or less than an ear, an instinctive affinity for and curiosity about, a sense that language is a playground.

Though the benefit of teaching a student to edit himself is perhaps more immediately apparent than the benefit of sending him home with more questions about his work than answers, the function of a writing class ought to be to teach the student how to teach himself, for any student who continues to write will need to know how to ask and learn from his own words far more than he needed to know how to fix the particular stories he showed to the class. Often the stories that come in are somewhere in a state of

development between the first idea and the fulfillment of an idea that may mature out of that. The business of the workshop is not merely to offer technical suggestions, but an occasion to free the writer from the first idea. In his introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay* Phillip Lopate argues that what gives a personal essay structure is the reader's sense of the author's going deeper, of emerging from the essay with more knowledge than he brought in (xxv). Clarence Major makes a similar observation about fiction: "I like to think in vertical rather than horizontal terms—reaching down to a subtextual level, below the purely social level of experience and staying in touch with that..." (Neubauer, 181). The surface of a fiction's structure is horizontal: something changes, a plot builds tension, reaches a crisis, and resolves; the reader's emotional response builds and releases tension; his understanding of the situation changes even if the situation does not. And it is mostly the horizontal that the student, beginning or advanced, comes to class to learn. But I teach—and believe writers should teach—out of a conviction that the process of a story, an essay, or a poem is also vertical. The writer has to reach down to the subtextual and perhaps subconscious level to discover what he is really writing about.

For no matter how dazzling the technique, without emotional value a work will fail. We cannot teach emotional value, but we can point it out when we see it, and we can point to its absence when it's not there. We can also show a writer how such value is achieved—which is nearly always indirectly and that is why it bears pointing out. By showing a writer which details or gestures, which rhythms in the prose, create emotional resonance and which do not, we may help her to find for herself the technical means to enrich the work with meaning. The student who cannot be helped is the student who wants to argue that because she did this or included that the value is already there. It is always there for the writer, because it's her work and she is very emotional about it. Everyone who writes knows how easy it is for a writer to confuse her own emotional investment in a work with the emotional resonance of the work itself, and that is why a

classroom with a perceptive teacher and well-read, conscientious peers can be so valuable.

Creative Writing and the Institution

Too often when the value of an M.F.A. program is challenged, its defenders have simply pleaded to have the students and programs left alone. Certainly the name of the degree creates an easy target, the notion that year after year schools are churning out so many "masters of fine arts," a notion that has led many of its defenders to protest that the students aren't hurting anyone—in contrast, I suppose, to medical students. We ought to be able to mount a better argument than that. In response to Joseph Epstein's complaint that writing programs have allowed poetry to be "vastly overproduced by men and women who are licensed to write it by degree if not necessarily by talent or spirit" (20), I would not defend the practice of certifying writers. Only the writing can certify a writer. One needs a license to sell beer, not to write poetry. All any degree guarantees is that the recipient has completed a particular course of study. What we certify is that the graduate has been exposed to the most rigorous examination of the way literature is composed and that it is an education she can apply in the further study of literature or such careers as editing or teaching. Occasionally I send a student from the M.F.A. program on to law school. You can be sure that student knows how to read the evidence of language, gesture, situation, and detail.

But my concern extends beyond the M.F.A. program to the undergraduate classroom and its relationship to the English Department and the university. English departments have traditionally privileged the teaching of literature (and more recently literary theory). As the late Wendy Bishop saw it, literature's dominance is maintained by having an Other (writing) with which to compare itself; literature and theory classes are viewed as "content" bearing, writing classes, composition and creative, as "contentless." In turn, creative writing sees composition as the Other to which it is superior. "Academic creative writers are always working to legitimize their 'pseudo-

literary' activities in increasingly theory-dominated English departments" (Bishop, *Released*, xvii, 9, 11). Legitimacy is crucial in the competition for funding. Though creative writing classes are popular, popularity does not confer status, and Bishop deplores the use of creative writing classes as bait to lure English majors who will fill literature classes. In graduate programs the use of creative writing as bait can be seen in the current trend among universities to search for distinguished professors, writers with names that will play well in recruiting and fundraising but that return the pedagogy of creative writing to the master-apprentice model Bishop disdains. Many of the writing faculty I've spoken to at institutions that have made such appointments in the past few years report arguing against such searches, which are usually the initiatives of university administrators, embraced by English departments but not the faculty of the writing programs they house. While the opposition of the creative writing faculty might be seen as sour grapes—envy for the star salaries, generous discretionary budgets, and reduced teaching loads—my conversations have convinced me that their real concern has far more to do with the effect on the students.

Bishop's agenda was to reform the teaching of creative writing by cross-pollinating it with composition, by blurring what she saw as an artificial divide. Her end was pedagogical, though a political note sounds throughout her work, and the political benefits of such an alliance within the English Department are obvious. Yet, as a long-time instructor in a graduate program, I cannot fully subscribe to her notion that writing be democratized. Certainly we should be empowering and affirming our students, certainly the process of writing should be unveiled, but in the end value judgments do and will come to bear; the product must stand on its own for a reader who has not shared in its process, and though conversations with my colleagues in rhetoric and composition offer useful pedagogical ideas for introductory workshops, I am doubtful of the benefit of diluting our advocacy for what we teach and how with theirs, for though we may share some of the same means, though all writing is an act of creation, our ends are not

similar enough. As an artist, I remain committed to aesthetic value, despite aesthetics' low standing in today's academic climate. As a writer, I care—must care—about the text. And as a teacher I care about my students in their attempts to create shapely and meaningful texts of their own.

It is not the point of this essay to call for creative writing programs to join or resist a partnership with rhetoric and composition or to secede from the English departments that have served as sometimes dubious sponsors. Rather, it is my intention to speak for creative writing to the colleagues, departments, curriculum committees, and administrators whose understanding of what happens in a creative writing class comes from outside, for these are the people who often participate in decisions that impact its teaching.

In considering the role of such instruction in the institution, we might look back to its late nineteenth century roots, for creative writing crept into higher education as a means of studying literature, a deliberate antidote to the philological approach that dominated its study at that time. As D.G. Myers notes, "The scientific bias of philology made it possible to exclude an aesthetic appreciation of literature from the university study of English" (26). Philology treated literature as if it were something of exclusively historical and/or linguistic interest whose meaning needed no interpretation. It fostered neither appreciation nor an understanding of its moral dimension. Creative writing became a way of studying the how and why of literature's value and meaning. As an independent discipline it still serves the same end. "...we do not expect to make all students into Miltons," poet and teacher Dave Smith acknowledges. "The biology major does not often become a Darwin. But we help students to realize that language is a living, vital reality; it is what we possess to experience and shape reality" (3).

As the latest report from the National Endowment for the Arts confirms, fewer and fewer Americans read. Though NEA Director Dana Gioia has long complained that the effect of creative writing in the academy has been to diminish the public

audience for poetry, his more recent remarks suggest that the real villain may be our television- and computer-saturated world—hardly a surprise. Students who take creative writing courses develop the habit of reading. Only a minority of undergraduate writers go on to M.F.A. programs and a life inside the academy. The majority become a part of whatever potential public audience literature has.

I would argue that the writing workshop has value not just to the student writer but to the university and to society as a whole. I do not mean the value claimed by the visible successes the graduate program produces, the "winners" as Rosellen Brown calls them (Neubauer, 50). What I mean is something deeper that goes to the core of the university's commitment to education in the humanities. The writer is the voice of humankind, speaking to the race of the individual and to the individual of the race, witness to the imagination, the intellect, history, and the life of his or her time. Literature is the record. By it we enlarge the bounds of our sympathies, for as it calls us to imagine that we are part of some other, as it calls us to understand what it is to be other, we join company in a way that we cannot in any other endeavor. In the words of Ralph Ellison, "The understanding of art depends finally upon one's willingness to extend one's humanity and one's knowledge of human life" (175). The students who pass through our classrooms know this. They listen; they read; they pay attention. They take with them a habit of art that if maintained can only continue to deepen their knowledge of what it is like to be human in a world where we may be mere particles of dust, but strive to be so much more.

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