A MATTER OF TUNING

Some Notes on the Teaching of Creative Writing

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My main contention is that our minds are pinched and starved. There are, of course, exceptions: some teachers of English have been able to avoid the triple dragons of careerism, overwork, and cynicism; some students leave us with a little light on their faces. But most of us feel the weight of an Official Imagination which is both ubiquitous and archaic - and most of our students go out bewildered, inhibited and inarticulate.

I have no space to go into the aetiology of this state of affairs. In any case that has been documented elsewhere. See The Dissenting Academy, ed. T. Roszak, and in particular the articles by Roszak (pp. 3-42) and Louis Kampf (pp. 43-61). The facts of the situation are where a teacher starts, and the facts are that English studies, in the main, constitute a huge and deadening irrelevance in the lives of most students in our universities, colleges, and schools; they are an enterprise which is totally useless to the society at large, and in some quarters they even revel in that uselessness. That this criticism can be levelled with justification at all the other departments of higher education is not in itself a persuasive counter-argument. English language and literature are one of the central concerns of the humanities and the liberal arts and, as one who professes in that discipline, I am disturbed by our failure as a profession, and anxious to come to terms with it. After all, we are still, pace McLuhan, primarily a verbal culture.

It seems to me axiomatic that, if my contention holds, any genuine teaching will be a subversive act. A teacher who cares about poetry and the teaching of it, for instance, will probably be concerned with matters beyond the dead whore of chronology. He will want to emphasize that literature has diachronic and 'contemporary' dimensions as well. He will want to show that if poetry is a music of the being, a voice in the blood and the throat and the belly, then to botch the words of a text or to read them with the wrong tonal emphasis is to commit the same kind of misreading as when a pianist mistakes a key signature or a simple notation of tempo. Yet that kind of mistake is a commonplace in our classrooms.

And if the teaching of language and literature is beset with ills, the teaching of creative writing is in a state of all but complete dilapidation. It is true that some colleges and schools have a liberal and enlightened attitude but, in many, the existence of creative writing courses is rarely a high priority. In academia, writers - like black people and women - constitute a problematic sub-culture and most teachers of English do not con-

sider the teaching of imaginative writing as an activity worth their consideration.

Yet there is some justification for this neglect. For one thing, teachers of Creative Writing - who are very often writers, or writers manqués themselves - do not appear to have much confidence in the enterprise. There is no accepted teaching method, grading seems relatively meaningless, and students' writing is either trivial, precious, stale - or all three. And if the real problem is that of the starved imagination, it has to be admitted that most courses are not designed to deal with the problem at all. The result is that most creative writing courses are sloppy and futile. For these reasons - after some preliminary attempts - I gave up the formal teaching of Creative Writing for a couple of years. I gave it up in the conviction that more useful tutelage could be accomplished in independent study, with occasional meetings of 4-6 students in a group. During the last year, however, whilst working at Northfield High School in the Poets in the Schools program, and at St. Olaf - where Davis Taylor and I have been working with 15 student-writers each Saturday morning for a three-hour period - we began to re-think the whole question of the teaching of Creative Writing at the undergraduate and high school level. Some of our thinking has been put into practice with results that have been instructive (to us, at least) and occasionally highly encouraging. What follows is a summary of, and some observations on a few of the strategies we have used. These are not intended as notes toward a definitive method - though we will probably build on these ideas ourselves - so much as items for discussion and debate. Most of our time has been taken up with the teaching of shorter forms of verbal expression which, for convenience, we call poems.

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I do not see how one can begin a class in creative writing in good faith unless one stands on the conviction that writing is first and last a craft, some of whose elements are transmissible. It is a craft of the manipulation of words so that, in consort, the words contain and articulate energy in the most expressive way that our luck and skill can manage. It is therefore necessary at some stage to make students aware of some of the major conventions of English prosody, of some of the devices that writers use to gain intensity and precision; of rhyme, half-rhyme, off rhyme; of stress, metre and syllable; of blank verse, free verse and projective verse. But it cannot be emphasized too strongly that to introduce technical considerations too early is a fatal mistake. And to introduce them out of context, not to flesh them out with the substance of living poems, is an utterly barren procedure which will damage any course irrevocably.

If my diagnosis of the situation is correct, the first concern is that of giving food to the imagination. To remind students that they have an imagination, and then to remind them that they have bodies, is a double courtesy for which they will be extremely grateful. Then to help them discover that the act of writing is the act of giving body to the imagination is a project which gathers meaning as they proceed. All very well, but how does one go about this? Stated in this way it all sounds very abstract.

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Humming we have found very good. After talking about the whole problem, try sitting round in a circle - Indian-style squats are fine, but not mandatory - and just humming together. You might then ask the students to try to make the sound originate in different parts of their bodies - their navels, their chest and throats and so on. This can be prefaced or followed by elementary Yoga exercises, rolling the head, stretching the arms, and deep controlled breathing.

The aim of these exercises is twofold - to establish a good working relation with the group and to help students to begin to live in themselves. Most people in the West write poetry in a state of neurotic seizure, a defiant other-worldliness, an eruption against the trivial and partly insane extraversion of our daily lives. The humming and stretching exercises are a preliminary toward the deeper aim of establishing the writing of poetry as a normal, healthy activity that can proceed from a state of balance and calm - though the balance and calm might be a form of intense concentration - as well as from fury and neurosis. The rhythm and length of time devoted to these exercises will vary, and intuition is a valuable guide here. Consultation is also important. Do you know any other good exercises? What kind of exercise makes you most aware of the things around you? Is your humming strong and clear or does there seem to be some block? Where?

One can now proceed, perhaps, to another dimension of this exercise by borrowing from the principles of Tantrism. Among other things, Tantrism posits that there are a number of sacred centers - or chakras - of the being. For the sake of clarity we restrict ourselves to talking about five of these (Tantrism has more). Our five are, respectively at the genitalia, the belly, the heart, the throat and the middle of the forehead (one can have some fanciful discussion of the third eye). Now imagine that each of these chakras has its own characteristic 'mode of being' - its own appetites and needs. The whole point of this exercise is to allow us to move freely from one of these centers to another. Our minds are normally so rigid that we find it difficult to make these transitions. But if poetry is to speak from, and to, the whole man then it is salutary and liberating to remind students that their genitals, as well as their minds, will also have a part in any proper song of the being. You might

want to explain that around the Tantric "column" there are two snakes - one moving toward heaven, the other towards earth. The task is to balance them - both heaven and earth are important.

If all that sounds reasonable, you can get down to practicalities:

Element (Quinta essentia)	Chakra	Musical Interval	Note
	Imagination (third eye)	Tonic	C
(Fire)	Throat	Submediant	A
(Air)	Heart	Dominant	G
(Water)	Belly	Mediant	E
(Earth)	Genitals	Tonic	C

Let us say that it is convenient to hum in the key of C. Begin from lower C and, whilst humming, think of the sound as originating in the earth. The note E will correspond to Belly and the element Water, and so on until you get to top C, which is the home of the imagination and the fifth and mysterious Quinta Essentia.

All this can be done with a light touch. You can emphasize the different qualities of the sound from the different chakras - low and dark in the earth - floating and bony in the head. And you can reverse the scale if you wish. Intuition and a concentrated relaxation are important in all these preliminaries. After the students are used to the procedure you might ask them what the genitals would say if they could speak, what the belly, what the heart - and so on. Ask them to write down images, parts of poems. When students freely associate around the "centers" results can be surprising. And in any case the whole experience will be weird enough for them so that they will not be able to lapse into any easy conventionality.

Particularly at first, the keys in all our strategies will be sense of play and indirection. We are after all hoping to stretch, or even discover, the muscles of the imagination; we are not teaching a course, so much as exploring new modes of perceiving the world within us and around us. And learning to wait, and listen, cultivating an alert passivity, are essential to our purpose. A musician has a whole range of traditionally proven exercises at his disposal. For the training of poets in the West there is literally nothing. We are committed therefore to finding ways and, after all, what's to lose if these exercises are inadequate? We will try some others. The field is so new that we have to rely on intelligent guessing, intuition, and pure luck.

Once students grasp the significance of the sense of play there are all kinds of things that can be attempted. Totems, for instance. Most students, particularly those from the spoiled middle-classes, have too strong a committment to their personal failures, triumphs and petty concerns. Part of the imaginative stretching is to get them beyond these solipsistic nets. So, totems. While in the circle ask the students to meditate on the animal that corresponds the closest to the movements of their own psyche - what creature do they most clearly empathise with? When they have found their totem - no need to rush, it might take a week - then ask them to find the Latin name and, depending on the self-consciousness of the group, you might ask them to adopt, and be called by, their totem names for the rest of the term. If this all works naturally, you are in a fine pedagogic position, as you have established the play principle as a normality, and you have provided one stratagem for that essential distancing that frees the mind from its quotidian concerns. Ask them to write a monologue of their totem, caught in a dangerous predicament. You might then ask them to think about their anti-totem, the enemy. What is he thinking? Write about him as well.

I want to underline that the use of Yoga, Tantrism, totems or whatever is not part of a campaign of conversion; they are used merely for the sake of getting students over the malaise I described at the outset, of helping them to think more freshly and with more elan. At first their poems will probably not be very good - though you may be surprised - but you will probably have established a ground of trust and curiosity without which any work in this field - and perhaps in any other - is nothing but dry bones.

Here are a few other techniques that can be used as alternatives or as complements to the above. Without any preliminaries, give the students a list of fictitious animals or beings that you, or they, have invented: dagrymple, chankle-diver, bush-beater, portaquillo, binyok, and so on. Ask them to make definitions of these creatures for those benighted souls who have never heard of them. Results can be hilarious. One student at Northfield described the bush-beater as "a species of North African ape who spends most of his time masturbating behind bushes." Such jokes, apart from their own merit, can be turned to good use; you might want, for example, to stretch the 'definitions' towards a form of nonsense-writing. Challenge the students to write definitions in which the grammar sounds plausible, but which contain no coherent meaning. Example: "A chankle-diver is a three-footed passenger ice-cream which itches terribly just at the moment where the North Pole damages itself with retired vibraphones."

The over-literalistic mind-set of most students might make such exercises difficult for them. You might therefore want to preface them by word-association games in which you try to crack

the literalism. For instance, if you give the students the word "sunflower" many of them will probably write "flower" or "plant" as the first word that comes to mind. But there are many more interesting and legitimate associations that a freer mind could make. The generic aspects of things, is after all, rather dull. Such leaps as:

eye of the sun...
ringed with green daggers...
brightly turning slowly...
yellow wind-gong...

might all be more interesting, and as accurate.

Now it might be objected that that is forcing things, and that's true enough. But we are, after all, working against the kind of mentality that assumes that giving a one-syllable synonym for the word "fleeting" represents some kind of imaginative achievement. (This example is not fictitious. I took it from the London University G.C.E. "O" Level Exam (1965) and I have no cause to believe that the examiners have been converted from the impoverished view of language that this kind of question implies.) Conscious strategies are therefore in order as long as they are seen as means and not ends.

Again, you might try isolating a cluster of images from a poem, asking the students to invent something around them, quickly. Where nothing comes - let it ride...

a wounded man...
almond blossom...
the fire is coughing...
spiders walking in the air...
do not turn around...

Or you might try an actual situation. You have dived off a spring board into a deep, clear pool in a river. What happens? Here's one that came from a sophomore:

Face to face from
fish to fish
it's weird feeling
like a fish blowing bubbles
I'm happy isolated with these
friendly fish but then
sadness comes for I must go back
into the world of hatred and mess

O.K. That's a slow, floating rhythm; now what about something much faster. You are a parachutist in the army, the first in the platoon to jump. The sargent has his knee in your back. Three... two...one. Suddenly you are pushed out into the mad air. What do you experience?

My stomach
where's my stomach
my toes are here
and ten fingers
but my stomach has left
leaving butterflies
behind...

Not remarkable perhaps, but a nice subversion of the cliche. After reading examples it may be a fine occasion in which to ta about the difficulty of creating a sense of action and one can point to how well some people have done it - Robert Sward, Hem- ingway, Spender, there are many writers from whom one can take examples.

"Triggers for the imagination" are practically endless. H are a few we have tried: -

1. Take in a box of wildly various objects. Have student close their eyes and feel them. Describe the object from inside. "I am hollow, smooth and silver" (a piece of tubi etc. Now write about the moment when, by some mysterious force, you are beginning to turn into something else. ("I am bending in the heat.")
2. Continue this poem: "I hate the way toothbrushes..."
3. Address a creature. For example, continue this: "Co roach, you..."
4. Your native language is Impali (a language which does not contain an "s" sound) but you do know a few English words. Your brother comes home after many years away. H do you greet him? (This can be a most useful preliminary for an excursion into "sound poetry.")
5. Describe a creature. Here's one done by a high schoo sophomore on the spot:

Frog, jumping
splash in the water
stop, look around
swim away into the mud
eat some dirt
just can't hack it
going to croak.

6. Write a poem, with two beats to a line, for a dancer, trying to create an image of something very beautiful.
7. Take a Shakespeare Sonnet and break the lines up into phrases, in the manner of a W.C. Williams three-step line This can cause marvellous arguments.
8. Describe a loved person as fully as you can. You may not mention more than three details concerning their phys ical appearance, and these have to be significant.
9. Write out a menu for an ideal meal. Fully described. Colours and textures most important.

10. Think cold. What is cold? What is being inside a cold day like?

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It doesn't matter at the early stages whether the students write poetry or prose. In any case, I am pretty sure that the differences are merely a matter of prejudice and taste. (I am certainly not aware of any workable definitions of their differences.) What matters is that the students' perceptions are awakened, and that they begin to enjoy a sense of words. At the outset anyway, a subtle process of restoring is the thing that is most urgently needed. When the class is liberated and eager to know more, one can then introduce technical matters and, at that stage, they will be much more readily absorbed.

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One morning at St. Olaf, after giving some of the preliminary exercises I have outlined - including Yoga, deep breathing and humming - I explained that many modern poems are crammed with images of death and despair, their movement is centripetal - into a knot of hard anguish. The imagery for such poems comes fairly easily. It is very difficult, on the other hand, to write a poem whose movement is centrifugal, and whose music and imagery lift and open into a quiet joy.

It was a bitter, midwinter morning. I asked students to imagine the first day of spring. One of them, in a few moments, wrote this:

> The sun is not yet golden, but it is very high
> and draws a favoring wind through
> doors and passageways and mouths -
> wind with a hint of cinnamon
> and a scent of lemons,
> which children somewhere must be eating now.
>
> O by the wind
> and by the magnetic power of the sun,
> I taste what they taste,
> and our mouths are one.

He was as surprised and delighted as we were. When moments like this happen, one feels that one's experiments might, with luck, contain the seeds of a new beginning. But it is only a beginning.

A Mini-Bibliography for Teachers of Creative Writing:

Ted Hughes: Poetry Is
Robin Skelton: The Practice of Poetry
Kenneth Koch: Wishes, Lies and Dreams
Babette Deutsch: Poetry Handbook: A Dictionary of Terms
Berg and Mezey (eds.): The Naked Poetry

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