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Lab Work: Creative Writing, Critical Writing, Creative Obsessions and the Critical Essay

My scholar friends often discuss practicing artists as if they are idiot savants - the belief seems to be that a writer may enact critical ideals in a given work, but the writer is unable to discuss these critical ideals intellectually. Beyond this, many critics claim a writer's intent doesn't matter (which emphasizes the idiot in idiot savant) seeming to dismiss the author's mind at work, seeming to ignore the roles of craft and vision. When creative writers write criticism, they are often discounted by traditional scholar-critics; the reason for this isn't, I think now, a difference in quality of research, but a difference in scope and purpose for that research.

In the poetry writing classroom, the writer-teacher spends significant time discussing issues of craft. In the best workshops, a long 'lecture' about line, form, meter, sound play, allusion, and other elements of a poet's toolbox are not uncommon; such discussions are, rather, necessary. Furthermore, the best workshops have a significant reading component in which students discuss craft, but to spend time focused on craft without a discussion of content - of vision - is a moot endeavor as one function of craft is to emphasize vision. The crafting of a poem is, after all, the crafting of an idea. The manufacture of new thoughts or the clarification of thoughts through writing is not a new notion. In E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, the old woman says: 'Logic? What rubbish? How can I know what I think till I see what I've said?' And in his wonderful essay 'A Way of Writing', William Stafford suggests that poetry writing is a means of discovering what one actually thinks. Stafford proposes that through the process of composition and revision, a writer clarifies what he/she has discovered, develops what he/she thinks/believes/feels. Craft becomes a way of honing these thoughts by working through how to present this discovery in the most effective poetry. This requires objective decision making. Thus, craft is the critical mind working on instinctual creative decisions. Craft is an aspect of critical thought.

Thus, less idiot.

In his essay 'The Useful Pursuit of Shadows', meteorologist Graeme Stephens suggests that the disciplines have gotten too compartmentalized, so that practitioners of one field of inquiry fail to learn from studies in another. He argues that the sciences learn from the arts and that historically artists have been keenly observant of scientific phenomena; furthermore, he argues against a very contemporary sensibility that the disciplines ought to be separated and studied with blinders. Today, many scientists still use research from other sciences to inform their own work, to broaden their vision. The study of physics influences meteorology, the study of

mathematics influences biology, etc; 2003's Nobel prizes show the study of biology influences chemistry. What would our science colleagues think of the debate - the open hostility or, worse, ambivalence - between writers and critics?

These days it seems rare to have a writer who is also taken seriously as a critic / scholar. Perhaps part of this has had to do with the proliferation of the notion of the 'professional' poet. Many young writers don't write reviews that engage literary ideals, they don't want to write risky poems but rather write ones that can get published, as if these things are mutually exclusive. What emerges, though, is a culture of easy criticism, of reviews that are little more than four page blurbs and that refuse to engage aesthetic sensibilities and discussions of craftsmanship, and of poems that are often dismissed as sounding redundant, the so-called 'workshop poem'. This is a loss for literary study and writers, as challenges by peers create and motivate new poems. During the time of the moderns, it wasn't uncommon to have someone like an Eliot or Pound, a Stein or Jarrell writing strong poems and smart criticism. Their works fostered *creative* and *critical* responses. In this post-modern / fractured era, we have few such writer-critics; many practicing poets have their essays dismissed as 'poets on poetry', published in literary journals that few scholars read; they have a more difficult time crossing over into the more traditional 'scholarly' journals. Only other poets read the literary journal or book. We're fractured, and with the exception of the Language poets, few of us don't cross the border between creative writing and criticism. Worse, now, the mention of Language poets reminds me that creative writers themselves have become more fractured, by genre, by school of writing, by form.

However, as a practicing poet, it's my critical work - whether I publish it or not - that clarifies and propels my creative endeavors (the scope of my vision, as it were) and what I learn from crossing fences allows me to move forward as a writer and teacher. In the critical essay I work out my creative obsessions. When many of my scholar friends dismiss these critical endeavors as lofty ambitions, I remind them of the failed manuscript of poems in a manilla envelope in their desk drawers.

For much of the last two years my scholarly research has regarded the prose poem as a form - I've read numerous collections of prose poems, both recent and historical; I've read articles on prose poetry, read interviews with practitioners of the genre including Russell Edson and Michael Benedikt, have written and published prose poems of my own, have taught a seminar on the prose poem, sat through papers on the prose poem, read critical works on the prose poem including historical overviews, book reviews and unpublished dissertations, and have written and published several critical essays on the form. The whole time I was researching and writing critical materials, I was honing the skills for my own prose poems, editing with information learned from such scholarly inquiry.

All this happened after finishing up a book of translations, I was confused about the direction of my own work: my vision, as it were, had been transformed, or else another part of my personality was engaged for the first time to language, and thus was able to broaden my vision. The translations were of work in a radically different aesthetic than my own as a poet, and when I began to want to reclaim the page, I found my writings heavily influenced by the surrealism and humor of this Turkish poet Ali Yuce. Although I understood Yuce's formal decisions in regards to his

content, I was unsure what it meant for my own work, and so rather than write multi-page, long-lined, meditative poems, I began to write prose blocks, such as this 'A Cat's Nightmares' which was written at that time:

She extends her long tail like an exclamation point or a
sabre she parries back and forth, swashbuckling. And again.
Maybe it's that chihuahua next door which she mocks from
the window: in her REM sleep visions, it's a vicious bull,
ring through its nose. Or else a cat box filled with
quicksand or a jack-in-the-box Purina can. Her legs flicker
as if she were jumping her getaway. It's no wonder she lives
enthusiastically and torments that poor squawking puppy;
it's no wonder she wakes me at 4 a.m., heavy on my chest,
little stiletto claws cutting me open, having brought me a
dead surprise as a gift, some mojo to keep the terrors at bay.
Yesterday, it was a squirrel still squirming with warmth,
and tonight it's a fist-sized sparrow lying quietly between
my ankles like a tar-and-feathered heart.

To move forward with these, I wanted to understand how to edit them, and to do that, I needed to understand how they related to a historical tradition. Much as I could trace the lineage of my poems through what I'd read - my poetic family tree as it were (Walt Whitman, T.S. Eliot, Hart Crane, Galway Kinnell, Muriel Rukeyser, Ann Sexton, among others) - I wanted to participate fully in the prose poem tradition as well. *This* required research.

To read creative works is a joy. To read the historical prose poems of Baudelaire, Bertrand, Stein, Ponge, Wilde and others was both fun and enlightening - I could see the roots for my own prose poems in these works. My knowledge of literary and social histories enabled me to also understand what they were reacting to as artists. Critical studies, most importantly Michael Delville's *The American Prose Poem* and Steven Monte's *Invisible Fences*, clarified certain trends, and opened the prose poem box up in ways the reading of the prose poems themselves were unable to do. In so reading, I was able also to challenge and reinvent the possibilities of the prose poem for myself and for my students. Reading criticism broadened my perspectives in the classroom, and led me to the development of another essay and new creative prompts for my students. It also led me to consider different rationales for making changes in the revision process. All of this work furthered my composition of new prose poems.

Currently, however, I'm looking forward. I don't want to be solely the prose poem man. I like the form, enjoy its quirkiness and whimsy, and continue to read critically about it and write my own prose poems. But my first love is the lineated poem, my focus then has returned to it.

I have always written long, meditative poems that fuse narrative and lyricism. When I met Mary Ann Samyn and was introduced to the idea of fractured lyricism, I wanted to understand it. I read numerous writers of this style, pursued essays about it, and finally wrote my own: 'Discussing a New Aesthetic: Some Notes on the Post Lyric Mode.' (LaFemina) I'll admit my critical understanding was more developed than my creative understanding - the fracture works against my sensibilities in a way the prose poem did not. But my ability to read this work and the criticism (most notably Alice Fulton's discussions on Fractal poetics) enables me to more fully articulate responses to such work that arises in workshop, in

discussions with other poets, and informs my own work when I need it to - allowing me another tool in the tool-box of craft: I've learned new ways to punctuate, different means of giving partial images, and how to start a narrative in mid-action. All of these have influenced my poems, without my having to write in the post-lyric mode.

Rather, now, I'm researching again the long poem - much as I did ten years ago. After years of living in rural communities, I'm again considering ways in which the urban is brought into a poem. Therefore, I'm looking to read and write critically on the long poem and visions of the American city. But to read this work, to understand it, because I am a poet *first* I also need to write poetry that embodies these theoretical ideas, that makes allusions to what I read, and which reflects the variety of research and attempts I've made in the intervening years. Two of my earliest published poems are long poems celebrating New York, but they reflect a younger mind, an immature vision. A new poem, one that I'm only now conceiving as I write this, might have prose poem sections which embody the gridlike layout of city streets, or it might use fractals in order to emphasize the fragmented narratives happening in a city as we walk through it, only aware of that momentary glimpse we get through a window. It'll be influenced by creative works such as Kinnell's 'Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World', but also the critical work on that poem and its relationship to Kinnell's other long poems. It will engage the work of my peers such as Noelle Kocot's wonderful 'Poem at the End of Time', but will also engage the theories surrounding the work of my peers. And maybe science. Or urban planning theory. And history.

To use a science metaphor: the creative writing - the making of poems or stories - is lab work; the critical and scholarly work is the theoretical work that surrounds lab work. Marianne Moore in her famous interview with Donald Hall noted: 'Do the poet and scientist not work analogously? Both are willing to waste effort. To be hard on himself is one of the main strengths of each. Each is attentive to clues, each must narrow the choice, must strive for precision... Jason Bronowski says...that science is not a mere collection of discoveries, but that science is the process of discovering.' The making of poetry is also a process of discovering. In the creative writing classroom you can see this similarity more accurately: a workshop is often divided into two sections - half of class time spent discussing published poems closely, and in doing close readings trying to understand and learn sensibilities to enact in the students' own poems. The second half of the class is spent in workshop, in looking at the lab work, in seeing how students used the theoretical / aesthetic discussions in the poetry lab.

What emerges, then, is a glimpse of the necessary symbiotic relationship between criticism and creativity for the practicing writer, one that helps clarify and develop an individual writer's vision. The best critics, I want to point out, think creatively. They make cognitive leaps and employ paradigms to works that seem antithetical to one another, and try to take into consideration the potentialities - the deliberate, author-determined potentialities - of any given piece. The best writers engage creative work critically. On the most fundamental level they study literary works with close reading for issues and concerns of craft, engage their own work in much the same manner, and take what they learn from this work and instill it into future pieces. They have wire-cutters with them and ladders; they're dressed in black so they can stealthily make their way across the boundaries critics and writers have erected between themselves, fencing themselves in as well as fencing themselves off.

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