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***Creative Writing for Foreign Learners of English:
some opening arguments***

Abstract:

In the native-speaking context, broadly there are two types of reason for teaching creative writing: therapeutic reasons and canonic reasons. You teach creative writing because the process of writing is good for students, good for us all. Or you teach creative writing because literature comes from somewhere: someone had to write it. And - if there's to be any more - someone has to be equipped to write it. The much-argued presumption in this later case being that creative writing is teachable.

The point of this paper is to make an argument for an explicit pedagogy in creative writing - in the writing of imaginative literature - directed at the English as a foreign language classroom. The argument is made on the basis of efficacy. Not for fun, not for self-development, not because canonic or even good works might be produced along the way, not for inter-cultural understanding in its own right. Not for any of these justifiable ends in themselves. But because creative writing is a best way into the forms of proficiency which languages demand of their non-native users. It's a best way in because those ends coincide with the language learner's most readily generalised goals.

Pandora's Demands

I think the genuine effort to welcome strangers into your language and culture always and inevitably opens a Pandora's box. From the foreigner's point of view that box unopened has very tall walls on every side: there's a wall of sound, a wall of words to learn, a wall of grammar, a wall of texts and contexts. All these imply a different geography of the mind from that which the foreigner grew up in. The moment one begins to unpack the box though, to explain the simplest text, where it comes from, where it goes, one begins to see the parenthetical and digressive manner of imbrication of text and context. Contexts fold in and out of each other, fall in and out of each other. Following - participating in - conversation means chasing those texts and contexts back into other texts and contexts and conversations, those which enabled them. The learner and teacher experience vertigo by turns in this process. It's a process which seems endless and nearly inescapable in just the ways that conversation is endless and nearly inescapable.

One of the best things about teaching your own language to foreigners is that it lays bare all sorts of assumptions which you'd never thought to challenge, never known were there. To use the parlance of the Russian Formalists, it *de-automatises* or *de-familiarises* your language for you. Provided you're prepared to take students' questions

as to what things mean and how they mean what they mean in the spirit of a dialogue between cultures you can't avoid seeing and hearing patterns you would not otherwise have noticed. So much for the teacher. The student on the other end of the teacher-enlightening conversation is hopefully picking up (sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously) the patterns needed to get into the language and use it: use it for the purposes which suit her.

I don't want to argue that telling tales is more important than making arguments. In fact I think there's a strong case that learning to argue well is the university's unique contribution to the social fabric it inspects and intervenes in. The university has *its* Pandora's box vocation. In a way then the question about whether and how and with what emphasis universities teach creative (especially fictive) uses of language is an ironic question about what relationship the scholarly world ought to have with the real one (assuming for a moment the validity of such a separation). Making judgements and making arguments on the basis of these (and vice versa) are tools for intervention in reality. The odds of changing the world without interpreting it first are slim.

Duties to Thought, Thought's Duties to Us

Why bother telling stories? Why bother framing arguments? Stories are a way of interpreting the world, a way of making sense, a way of making something satisfying out of what might otherwise seem chaotic or unreasonable. Story and argument are ways of understanding the world. Understanding is a kind of power: if you understand why and how things happen then you might be able to make things happen yourself. Different stories and different arguments reveal different understandings, different worlds. What kind of traffic is possible between worlds and between ways of understanding?

When understanding between cultures (or peace) is the aim then there is a spirit of crossing from one mind to another: a dialogic spirit. It's notoriously difficult to keep a conversation of that nature and order on the rails. That's because there aren't any perfectly level playing fields between cultures. That's because there are power relations between 'partners' in dialogue. However I think that people whose work is between cultures do have a duty to keep conversation going.

But to keep it going on whose rails? One struggles inwardly to fairly perform such duties out in the world with others. It's hard to be fair to other sorts of sentience because it's hard not to read the world all our own way. Not all stories or arguments are good or useful or effective. There's a fine line between platitude and the serious work of world repair which story or argument might facilitate or mar. There's a fine line likewise between the cynicism of a stance sufficiently knowing and the renovation of knowledges which actually leads to improvements: to better knowledge or a better world.

The non-natives I'm with enable me to see what my culture and my words feel like from the outside, something which would be much more difficult without them. Non-natives, like children, have an affinity for the aspect of language which Merleau-Ponty refers to as wild meaning (Merleau-Ponty 155). In the process of getting control of words they take words to (and beyond) their limits. They test them by finding out what they can and can't do with them. But the meanings that foreigners make and mar and struggle for are different from those children play with. That's because those new and foreign words are not their first means of meaning. They are coming from somewhere as full of sense and as full of nonsense as where I am, where I come from. They are as languaged in their sentience. When we talk to each other, when we understand each other, we get a new angle on each other's sense and nonsense. We make sense and nonsense of each other, we guide each other by these means. Poetry (since the twentieth century

particularly) has this affinity with foreignness: that it does to one's own language what a foreigner cannot help but do to another language.

That kind of reciprocal guidance which the native speaking teacher and the non-native learner offer each other, depends on the possibility of an open dialogue, depends on a kind of indirection: the conversation if truly open is negotiated and thus has charge of itself. It is neither mine nor yours.

If then the imaginative text offers the individual language learner one of the best ways in this is because it suits a proficiency in indirection: a kind of inter-cultural flexibility. The properly playful text - as indirected text - may have the best prospect for promoting hybridity. It may have the best prospect, that is, for allowing cultures to find each other, rather than being imposed on or compelled by each other. To the extent that - like a conversation - it doesn't know where it's going, the playful text has a chance of allowing those participating in it to find each other on an equal footing.

Coming into a language then involves two types of taming. The non-native tames the words of the language they are coming into. Through that process of taming they become her words. They lose their alien character as they become familiar, useful. And the language tames the non-native. They lose their alien character as they manage to make more and more non/sense with what were new words, now words becoming familiar. The target language translates or limits or reduces (or expands) her manner of meaning to the acceptable range of the target language.

An interlocutor, whether interested in that process itself or not, if interested in writing, finds the journey useful because, whether consciously or not, it allows her to simulate the experience of being outside of her means of meaning. The experience of taming for the tamed may bring some glimpses of the wild. That's what *recovered innocence* is about in poetry: the effort to see and feel and speak for the first time again. And here's the paradox: poetry's interest is in the effort to see and feel and speak for the first time, yes, but as I am now, with the equipment I have now for the task. I think this is one of the impossible tasks with which poetry is burdened: to be inside and out of words at once. That's a lot like being a foreigner.

Creative Responses to Culture

The odds of interpreting the world without changing it in the process, perhaps in imperceptible ways, are low. That's the observer's paradox one has to live with if one hopes to speak or write or teach at all. The fact that intentions are not always realised does not mean that interpretive efforts are without effect. It's merely the case that effects are not fully predictable. That's what makes them worthwhile.

Which is more eloquent: story or argument? Which is more evocative? One wisely mistrusts the obvious answers here. One wisely mistrusts the question. The greater eloquence of the story - if you accept that answer - is to do with the work its reader has to do. The complicity of this reader whose doubts can only be as to veracity is better than that of the reader who must wonder whether to agree or not. Why? Because a story cannot lead with the authority of an argument. A story has a better kind of authority: the authority which demands (rather than deferring, delaying or denying) interpretation.

But the fact is that stories carry and promote arguments (hopefully more than one at a time). And arguments depend on and make sense of stories. That's where they come from. That's where they go. The best stories and arguments blur and fold across the genre line so that the line is not even noticed. That seamlessness is the absent manner in which creative effort makes itself invisible.

My argument is for reading and writing imaginative literature. Reading it so you can write it. Writing it so you can read it. Reading and writing it because, like it or not, it is demanded of you as part of the competence demanded of participation in a culture. I call this a *creative responses to culture* approach. It's about responding to culture in kind. It entails a dialogic style of text focused teaching: teaching which involves students in a cycle of reception and production. It is a means of equipping the learner with skills for a dialogic kind of literacy: as an ongoing way into a culture, as a way of becoming a player in a culture.

Stories and our memory of them then provide both an interpretive function and a shorthand for the business of interpretation. By tagging a particular situation with a particular story (or fragment evocative of a particular story) we save ourselves the trouble of explaining how we see it, of justifying a position as our own. Borrowing a story for such a purpose is then like borrowing an argument or an identity. The old cliché that there are only twenty stories (or a hundred or five) refers to this pigeon holing function. It's a way of demonstrating the iterative aspect of the range of human understanding and response. These are the ways of seeing the world, this is the range of events. It's in this essentialising manner that story and argument meet generically. A world view is a circular argument. It has to justify itself in its own terms. It has that epic knack of the tale able to be joined anywhere because constantly retelling itself. Like a Möbius loop or a Fortunatus' purse: the inside is the outside. Which is to say that the outside is lacking.

Stories in this sense are like metaphors. Or you could say that metaphors are like stories. Better to say that story and metaphor participate in some kind of reversible relation. They filter the real through or into familiar or unfamiliar others: other events, other situations, other stories.

I think that - however much recycling is involved - it's important to get new stories written because that kind of writing expands the range of human understanding: the range of humanity. I think that the question of originality in relation to that task is much more complicated than it is generally credited to be. The non-native brings that question into sharp relief because, having only experienced as it were the last five minutes of the culture, it's easier for things to seem new to her. That's how the non-native's naïvety in the language they are entering is like and unlike the *recovered* innocence for which the poet strives. This must of course be less true with English language culture than for any other today because of English's *world language* status. The words of English are familiar almost everywhere. And yet the non-native and the poet still have plenty of opportunity to bring us to words as we've not come before.

Language and Literature/Reading and Making

If it's important to get the non-native's story read then it's important to get that story into English. That's the easiest way for a story to breathe in the world today. If you want people to be able to work fluently with the English language and you want their stories to be available to anyone who understands the English language then it makes sense to help those people to learn to tell their stories in English. One of the problems with this project is that non-natives - like the rest of us - see their own language as the natural vehicle for representation, for instance for the making of metaphors or the telling of their stories. English is an *other* language with other purposes: purposes which are specific, or in the context of the university, specifically academic. Those purposes usually entail the use of referential (rather than representational) strategies with language. You could gloss the difference between these two types of language as the difference between saying 'I love you' and 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?'

Not that the academic context will often require either of these particular utterances. But it will require picturing and storytelling. It just doesn't imagine itself as making that kind of demand. The French philosopher, Michele Le Doeuff in her book *The Philosophical Imaginary* shows convincingly though that even the driest and most 'direct' or 'rational' of philosophies gets where it's going discursively by means of imaginative excursions. It's her thesis that 'there is no kind of thinking which does not wander' (Le Doeuff 12).

Story and poem require representational language: language for picturing, for imagining. A lot of everyday conversation, not to mention the great mass of story-based popular culture, requires that kind of language. Explanation in general has recourse to it. As does argument. It's difficult to give an example without picturing things in words. Fluency in a language entails a reading ability in popular culture because it entails participation in conversation. If you can't imagine with your interlocutor you're in trouble. That's why dreaming in a target language is such a sign of a breakthrough in learning. When you dream in a language you're learning you have crossed an imaginative threshold out of your native culture. Or at least your unconscious thinks that you have.

Academic discourses, as Le Doeuff shows, also require representational abilities of their readers and writers. It's merely the case that they don't imagine themselves as requiring those abilities. They present a different kind of myth of themselves to the world. They represent themselves to the world as 'plain speaking'; and for the most part the world takes them at face value. This myth goes back a long way. Note that Aristotle needed his metaphoric 'bare facts' (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 654) in order to explain the contrast between tropic and 'normal' discourse.

Whether discourses delude themselves about their nature or not is a moot point for native speakers. The native is already on the merry-go-round and acculturated to the other means of meaning which allow discourses to delude - or not to delude - themselves. The native copes well with the metaphoric and narrative strategies which a discourse might employ and at once deny. They cope well with a curriculum hidden in that manner because that's probably the way they came. They may well be heavily invested in hiding the curriculum because hiding it may keep down the membership of the exclusive club of which they are a member. The non-native on the other hand may just be confused; may have a hard time getting membership.

Why does English require a specific or an academic purpose? How can its purposes be made specific or academic? For those who believe, with Merleau-Ponty, that the meaning is not on the words like the butter on the bread (Merleau-Ponty 155), the assumption that language and culture lack direction in their own right is untenable. A conversation knows where it is going.

That spectre haunting every effort to assert in its own rights culture as an end of investigation, culture as the thing to produce - the assumption that practical ends must be poured into the means which language provides - tends to paint literature and creative writing people as fringe dwellers, people living on borrowed time. It paints them as people to be humoured because they might be useful along the way because they have a familiarity with the equipment of language and culture, a familiarity which could however be dangerously obsessive. That's more or less how Plato saw them in the *Republic*.

Literature, creative writing, cultural studies are read along these lines as frivolous accessories to the real business of writing the business letter, of getting the chemistry report done, of handing in the essay for another subject. As if it were only because the world has to get things done that we're bothering about English at all. I think that this

unargued assumption is fairly deafening from outside of the humanities. How should we word carers, word workers, deal with it inside the humanities? I don't think you're obliged to blow Montezuma kisses when he's standing over you with the blade honed and ready to tear your heart out.

For the non-native as much as the native the university needs to provide a place where language and all it enables - as opposed to a narrow agenda of the day - are ends in themselves, given free rein as such. Why? Why do the lit. types and the creative types have to harp on about the need for openness and vagueness, for picturing and digressing and for lack of direction? Simply because the most essential functions of language learning are entry into a new culture, participation in that culture, transaction between cultures: these things in their own right. Getting to do those things entails openness and indirection. It entails imaginative effort. It involves the inward eye.

The inevitably intercultural agenda of the language classroom is best served by taking the target culture and participation in it seriously. It is not well served by cowering before the immensity of canons or the difficulty of explaining how texts work, how they relate to each other, how to get into conversations about them. No discipline would be served by those lacks of strategy.

Nor does respect for the openness of and openness to the creative in language commit anyone to disorganisation or to impenetrable mysteries. A teacher helps students to find their ways in. That means organising and penetrating the mysteries. Not ignoring them. Not killing them off.

It is the creative in language - the reading and the writing of it - that opens out possibility, that opens onto worlds other than as they are, worlds other than this one we're in as-it-is. It is the interpretive range creative work demands which opens onto the posture of the genuine question: the question without an answer presupposed. That's the speech act at the heart of peaceful dialogue. The genuine question is the mind's most open act. It's in that spirit one crosses between cultures if one does. One needs to become unsure in order to investigate a certainty: for instance the certainty of who I am, for instance the certainty of your difference from me. It's only through uncertainty that the other worlds of imagination become possible. Argument depends on these things. They are a kind of content for it: both the setting and the *what there is to argue about*.

Let's sum up the steps in *this* argument then. That difference in culture is to be respected and that the best way of demonstrating this respect is through a dialogue, that the products of culture should be taught. And that the products of culture should be responded to, critically but also in kind. This is not only because that's the best way to learn how they work but because that's the respect they deserve.

Dialogue between cultures entails cultural production as well as reception. One side speaking while the other only listens does not constitute a dialogue. Dialogue involves more than a 'read-only' approach. Participation in a dialogue between cultures implies more than merely the production of critical texts. If the creative text is studied because it is a peak product, then there is no parity in the conversation until the student has the opportunity to create, as well as to respond critically, to what others have created.

The Canonic is Cathartic

To return to the split with which I began, between the canonic and the cathartic. To those, natives or non-natives, first finding their way into it the canon seems more like a wall (to admire or to piss on, or both at once, as the case may be) than a process one

could learn to participate in. I think the *read-only* (lit. crit. only) approach to imaginative literature actually encourages that view.

For non-natives, to begin with, the wall is a particularly apposite image. Canon, grammar, lexicon are all the inalienable property of others. Questions of plagiarism and demands for originality start out being difficult to compass for this reason. To begin with all of the words are somebody else's. It doesn't matter how many. *None of them are mine*. So it's hard to see what wouldn't constitute stealing. There's an irony in that personal battle with plagiarism. It's when you've really appropriated the words that you're free to use them, that you can no longer be accused of stealing. Possession is nine tenths of the law.

Of course these kinds of facts contradict the international status and use of English. Just about everyone who teaches English does actually feel a moral obligation to help the non-native to find a way in. That's why we don't for instance deliberately teach mistakes. Language may be a game but it's not *just* a game. It's the game in which the real goes on.

Asking which ways might be the best ways into the game points to serious ethical questions about the mixed messages which we can't help but send students. The native speaker's knowledge of her language is so unconscious that it is difficult for the native speaker to begin to explain. Which kind of facilitation is best? Which kind of facilitation would be least hypocritical with regard to the openness of its secrets? Few get to join the near-natives' club.

When we teach literature without fostering or allowing a creative response to it, when we teach essay but not story writing, we are delivering a message about which corner students ought to be in, about what kind of access they can have.

The ethical bottom line on this, for those of us who dedicate our lives to literature in various forms, is that we should not perpetuate the idea that we are divided from the world's past literary production by an impermeable membrane through which one can watch but not touch.

In an increasingly virtual world the danger of that kind of isolation is growing. But in an ever smaller world, with ever better access to the world's past literary productions (among the information rich at least), the possibilities for participation and for blurring the lines between production and reception and between modes of delivery are ever greater.

The battle of the living writer, the learning writer, is as the battle of the dead, to be heard. A taming battle. The taming of context to your text. Of technology, of genre, of the means of telling, to your tale. The challenge is as Ezra Pound put it: *to create the style by which your work will be judged* (Scully 32).

If the taming fails in the end, if it all gets beautifully out of control, as in Yeats' poem 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', wouldn't that be the ultimate triumph? Your creatures, canonised, survive you. That's the secret hope of every writer. Words - acts of communication - take over from the whims which would have directed them.

Every place, every people, every person has a story to tell. Everybody's here-and-now is important. The world deserves to hear from us and we should all have the right to tell the world. That telling means making arguments, means agreeing and disagreeing with what other people say. But it means more than that. It means playing with the words at our disposal in our own way. It means telling our own tales in our terms. And it means meeting others half-way with the words which make sense to them. It means letting others' tales be told.

With stories we can follow the playwright's old maxim: *don't tell me, show me*. In a story a question need not be framed as such. The one telling can lead us to many questions. Arguments may of course adopt these narrative means of leading us to indirection, to individuation. And in that case it's story telling techniques which the hortatory writer needs to adopt.

It's wrong to think that there's a level of language competence below which people don't have stories to tell or means of telling them. That cannot be true for people who already have a language and culture at their disposal. Such a claim would be like saying that there was a level below which they had nothing to mean or to understand. You can tell a story with your hands. You can ask a question with your eyes. With first words stories begin.

We teach literature because the English language isn't just a pile of words and a set of rules for putting them together. Every language is much more than that. We teach literature because teaching language is teaching culture. And we have a responsibility to introduce students to the best cultural products of the language. Literature is the best way into the idioms and the stories of a culture for the simple reason that literature is the language's best product. There's a reason why it survives. Understanding a culture by means of its best products is the key to an intelligent conversation with the members of that culture.

I think we should teach creative writing because the processes of culture and of literature are alive. We can participate in them. We don't have to merely be spectators. Our students can read literature so that they can make literature, so that they can speak to the world for and about themselves, their *here-and-now*, their *who I am*. And about whatever else it is they wish. That's the kind of intelligent conversation we should encourage them to join.

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