LITERARY THEORY IN THE CREATIVE WRITING WORKSHOP

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Literary theory and creative writing are typically conceived as antithetical pursuits operating in separate realms, two distinct disciplines best confined to their own arenas of discourse. Literary theory is abstract and rigorous, governed by the dictates of logic and reason; creative writing is concrete and sensuous, subject to the caprice and impulse of inspiration. Theory is expository, rhetorical, scholarly, objective; creative writing is imaginative, paratactic, impressionistic, subjective. Even these apparent formal and methodological differences, however, indicate little about the underlying *contention* between literary theory and creative writing, for there exists not a small measure of uneasiness between the two practices, a certain "tradition of animosity" between writers and critics that, according to literary historian D.G. Myers, has its roots in "an anti-scholarly animus that was originally directed against [what was perceived as the excessively positivistic and overly analytical practices of English] philology" (16). Gerald Graff, commenting on an English department at a major university, observes that creative "writers are almost all practice-oriented, hostile or indifferent to literary criticism, while theorists look down with lordly indifference on mere contemporary writing" (quoted in Myers 4). While theorists may be condescending toward what they see as some poets' lack of erudition or their naive expressionist approach to language, practicing poets may distrust what they perceive as the sophistry and arrogance of theory. Many creative writers suspect theorists of some form of gross appropriation; even literary criticism that is

not overtly theoretical, that seeks merely to explain or clarify the operations of literary texts, is suspected of being imperialistic, commandeering, or presumptive. One consequence of this distrust is that theoretical approaches to the writing of poetry and fiction may not only be slighted but actively discouraged—in the classroom and in contemporary creative writing textbooks as well as in teaching methodologies. In short, the prevailing attitude holds that literary theory and creative writing can and should have nothing to do with one another.

Except that they do—and indeed should. And my reason for asserting so is simple: theory is already present in the workshop. Despite creative writing's pragmatic pedagogy—despite its emphasis on craft, method, and workmanship, on strategies for generating, critiquing and revising creative material—theoretical issues of intention and reception, of textuality and intertextuality, of subject positioning and misprision are implicitly present every time a poem is discussed or evaluated by the class. Simply using the pronoun "I" in a poem, for instance, is to operate on assumptions about language and the self that may be productively questioned. Class discussion of the difference or distance between the written "I" and the actual writer may help students understand distinctions among such fundamental terms as "author," "narrator," "speaker," "persona," and "character," as well as help them think about the variations among subjective points-of-view. A writing assignment that asks students to present multiple first-person accounts of the same event is a simple way of familiarizing them with the subtle differences between, for instance, persona-oriented and autobiographical points-of-view.

Indeed, the concrete situation of the workshop, in which authors are physically present, is an ideal one in which to inquire into how a poem's speaker and its author are similar or divergent; the teacher needs only to cultivate a certain degree of honesty on the part of the writer. Individual students might also be encouraged to break the boundaries of the self in order to "become" other people who are vastly different—a process made possible by the imaginative vehicle of verse or prose. A writing

task that directs a student to break the cardinal rule of "write what you know," that directs her to write from the point of view of a character who differs vastly from herself (in age, gender, profession, opinion, etc.) is a straightforward device to accomplish this objective. Alternatively, students might be asked, "To what supposedly unified subject does the pronoun 'I' refer?" This might lead into a discussion of the self as a complex and fractured entity composed of manifold, often contradictory selves or roles. Who has not struggled with the conflicts of being both a student and a daughter or son, for instance? Students might be asked to list several of the various facets of their identity—their ethnic mixture, family role, social class, personality, linguistic group, profession, writing proclivity (poet/novelist), gender, etc.—and consider how each aspect is reflected in their writing. "Which self or part of the self speaks in a particular poem or stanza or line," one might ask during a workshop, and "how is or can that self be balanced, challenged or contradicted by other poetic voices?"

Helping students become aware of such theoretical issues and contexts underlying the production and reception of writing will, I believe, provide them with essential analytical skills they need to assess creative work, give them a stronger foundation for understanding and responding to literary traditions, and sharpen the manner in which they approach the study and practice of writing. In considering concepts of authorial intention and reader response in relation to the teaching and practice of creative writing, I pose such questions as, "In what ways is theory already present in the creative writing classroom?" and "How will a more informed approach to theory benefit creative writing teachers and students?" The answers to such inquiries assume relevance not only with regard to workshops in creative writing but for all composition classes that utilize the workshop format, so, though I speak largely of "poets" and "poems" here, I am by implication considering all writers and texts, regardless of discipline or genre.

Typical workshop procedure is simple, even ingenuous: students copy and distribute their poems to the class; the class then reads and discusses the poems, offering praise and constructive criticism. Yet this elementary protocol is not unproblematic, for it operates according to several theoretically questionable assumptions about language and literature. Most fundamentally, workshops, which are often primarily aimed at consciously and willfully improving first drafts, function on assumptions such as that all poems are ruled by authorial intention, that the author is the undisputed origin and master of her work, and that, indeed, there exists an entity which we can without difficulty agree to call an author—assumptions which seminal theorists such as Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes have proved problematic. Yet these assumptions are so ingrained in and central to most workshops that, should the notion of intention break down, the entire workshop process may spin out of control or become meaningless. Nevertheless, the loosening up of the idea of authorship may be put to good use in the class. Students who consider themselves poor poets, for instance, often find relief in the idea that their previous poetry wasn't written by themselves but by their naïve Hallmark-card ideas about what poetry is; thus, the new conceptions about poetry that they learn in the workshop will ultimately make them into new poets. Although distinction seems subtle, I've found that beginning poets respond avidly to the notion, since it renders moot one of the more personal pitfalls of writing poetry—the element of the inborn bad poet. Similarly, I remind my students, any previous body of work students have created does not count toward their authorship with regard to my class; thus, throughout the semester, students are compelled to remake and redefine themselves (how they conceive of themselves as authors) for the purposes of the workshop—often in experimental veins. This idea of the semi-autonomy of the writer and her writing is crucial. While I do not believe that the notion of authorial mastery should or even can be jettisoned from the workshop setting altogether, I find that a too credulous acceptance of intention, a too unquestioning approach to authorship, can be

highly counter-productive, threatening to stifle student creativity or to turn the class into a mere podium or showcase for student authors.

Most workshops employ a well known ruse for evading the most blatant exhibitions of authorial tyranny: it is common classroom policy for the author to remain silent as the discussion of her work ensues. In this way the class achieves, at least temporarily and provisionally, what theorists might call the death or erasure of the author. The author's voice, her controlling identity, is "removed," to use Barthes' term (147). Students workshopping a manuscript no longer speak of a poem's author, but of its speaker, persona, or narrator. In this virtual suspension of authority, this unmooring of the poem from the intention of its creator, students are then left to analyze the work through its linguistic, rhetorical, narrative and figurative forms; the students are compelled to rely on a New Critical close reading, a scrutiny of its formal elements. As in a literature course, attention might be paid to how fundamental techniques such as diction, connotation, simile, and imagery contribute to the theme of the poem. In this manner, attention is directed away from "what the writer intended" and towards the meaning directly conveyed or suggested by the actual words on the page. In short, students are asked to gauge if and how well a poem reads "to the letter"— largely without respect to any larger aesthetic, historical, or institutional context.

Practically speaking, to hold the author in abeyance in this manner during workshops has several obvious advantages, not least of which is that it gives the writer the opportunity to witness, quite directly, how her words affect an audience—to observe first-hand how her intentions coincide with or deviate from her peers' responses. The workshop format unambiguously drives home the point made by reader-response critics that the literary work has two poles or orientations, one of which corresponds to the text ruled by the author's intentions, the other to the text as realized or completed by the reader; as Wolfgang Iser's formulates it, "the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text,

or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two" (274). The workshop offers a unique theater in which the student author may witness this textual equivocation enacted first-hand. In doing so, it helps illustrate the point that the poem is primarily embodied in language and so is public rather than private; moreover, it teaches that the poem is, in W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's words, "detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond [her] power to intend about it or control it" (5). Student authors are reminded, in short, that their precious personal possessions, their poems, once released into the realm of the reading public, become subject to the vagaries of reception.

This useful lesson, ironically, usually encourages student authors to sharpen their intentions as far as possible. Seeing their words and meanings twisted in various ways, writers suddenly grow eager to avoid obscurity by adding specific details, to hone their metaphors and sharpen their images, to fully develop their characters, to improve the narrative point of view, to add expository background—to refine, in sum, their execution of writing techniques central to effective writing. Generally, they also grow skeptical of Romantic or expressionist approaches to writing and become more interested in affective stylistics and reader-response methods. To encourage such interests in my classes, I have students review Iser's theoretical work on the phenomenology of the reading process. Familiarity with the subtle processes of anticipation and retrospection, of surprise and frustration of expectations, is of immense value in the workshop setting for both readers and writers. I have my students perform straightforward exercises designed to make Iser's theory concrete and accessible. We might read a poem line by line, pausing to discuss what thematic or aesthetic claims are proffered by each separate line; we might read a story sentence by sentence or paragraph by paragraph, pausing to discuss precisely what expectations a sentence creates, fulfills, or modifies, what narrative space each paragraph opens up. We rigorously debate the distinctions between showing and telling, between exposition

and dramatization, between obscurity and ambiguity, gauging how a specific detail or metaphor either does or does not "engage the reader's imagination in the task of working out things for himself" (Iser 275). Identifying the gaps or ambiguities present in a text, key passages where the reader is clearly invited or required "to bring into play his own faculty for establishing connections," we attempt to ascertain at what point the active and creative aspects of reading shade into burden, overstrain, or frustration for the reader (Iser 280). Overall, authors are reminded that, in order to achieve the meanings and effects they intend, they must provide sufficiently accurate and full raw materials with which their readers may work. On the other hand, they learn that an overly discursive or didactic approach might lead to readerly boredom; they learn that they need to find a balance between discursiveness and parataxis. The writerly axiom to "leave it up to the imagination" thus becomes a tangible, pragmatic, almost scientific concern.

Unfortunately, in most workshop scenarios—and this has been my experience in the classroom at both the undergraduate and graduate levels—authorial rule is merely postponed, suspended only for the duration of the workshop session, which is burdened with a subtext, undermined by expectation of the moment when the students will turn their heads toward the writer and ask, *Well, what does it mean?* Though the custom of authorial non-intervention in workshop discussions might seem temporarily to suspend writerly authority—or if it does so theoretically—the real-world effect differs; the class's pretense is usually thin and unconvincing. Most students would *not* agree with Wimsatt and Beardsley when they write that "the design or intention of the author is *neither available nor desirable* as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art" (3, *emphasis added*). With the author personally and bodily present in the classroom, students may easily miss the point of theoretical subtleties that ask them to be skeptical of authorial functions. The writer is sitting right there. And who, after all, is better acquainted with the meaning of the poem than the author herself?

Turning to the author at the end of a workshopping session is a crucial moment in the classroom, for, as a conclusion to the discussion, it unambiguously reinstates the writer to a position of ultimate authority; the danger is that the entire workshopping session will be viewed in retrospect as nothing other than having taken stabs in the dark, having merely guessed at the writer's intentions. The message is that, despite the professor's lesson in the theoretical death of the author, in real life it is still the author who counts.

I diffuse this pivotal moment in several ways. First, during the actual workshop, I encourage student reviewers to "take the manuscript over," to assume it as their own, to suggest revisions as if the writing were actually theirs; this practice usually meets with some resistance—*How do I know what the author experienced or had in mind?* most students protest—though in time the students grow accustomed to the practice. In this exaggerated way, all writers in the class become aware of the possibility that it is readers who have the final say regarding the meaning of a text. Another way I thwart the return of the author is that, at the end of the workshop session, I ask her not to explain the work, but rather to pose questions to the class regarding the manuscript; in this way, the students realize that the author is not present in the workshop in order to clarify the text, but rather to learn from its reception. Finally, I further pursue the question of authorship. I don't let the author have the last word, but return to the manuscript once again.

To prepare for doing so, I first have my students read excerpts from Roland Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author," which is useful in that it goes well beyond Romantic/expressionist and New Critical formulations of authorship, speaker, and persona. Prompted by the essay, the class begins pursuing theoretically charged questions that dig at the assumptions, attitudes, and ideologies behind the author or narrator's voice. The question "*Who* is speaking in the poem" is rephrased as "*What* is speaking in the poem?" Is the author nothing but a mouthpiece for some cultural perspective? Is some collective viewpoint or ideological

belief *speaking through* the author? Following the prompts in Barthes' essay, my students pursue various subtle formulations of the issue. Is it really the personal experience of the author that has furnished her with a certain attitude or philosophy toward the subject matter? Is it merely the author's acquired ideas about what constitutes literature that inform the text's metaphorical or narrative choices? Is it universal wisdom or common sense incarnating itself in the manuscript? Is it pop psychology or postmodernism or television sensibility speaking?

This class exercise makes student authors aware that what they think of as their own personal voice may be unwittingly informed by some ideology, some prefabricated or pre-existing idea or attitude. If students want to write unique, individual, and original work—and most of them do—they become aware that they have to pay close attention to and be honest about the true sources of the situations, attitudes, and ideas they are writing about. Despite any purely individual or expressionist impulses that may underlie a poem's genesis, language and literature are social institutions, and meanings are generated communally. An author doesn't and can't and shouldn't try to circumvent such contexts, but rather work through them and with them for her own benefit.

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