

Teaching the Laureates: Bringing Poetry Down

In a course I taught in Spring 2006 called American Poetry and its Laureates, I faced a number of pedagogical challenges. How do I teach a course about the American Poets Laureate when, surprisingly, very little scholarship about this very prominent public position has been published? Because I proposed and designed this new course, I knew beforehand that I would have to do the same kind of research and preparation required of a literary critic planning to write an essay for publication. But given the necessity of this kind of deep critical inquiry, how do I teach a class full of mostly first- and second-year students, many of whom wanted merely to fulfill one of the university's general education requirements and had little or no interest in the world of letters, much less poetry? How, then, do I connect with my students as both a literary scholar and teacher? And how do I inspire them, in turn, to connect with poetry in critical and creative ways?

These challenges are not unrelated. They are the same challenges all publishing scholars face when they enter a classroom, challenges similar to the ones poets themselves face when they send their poems out into an often baffled and sometimes indifferent, word-weary world. Many of the laureates have addressed this problem by devising various public outreach projects in order to promote poetry in the lives of ordinary American citizens. Robert Pinsky's Favorite Poem Project, Billy Collins' Poetry 180, and Ted Kooser's American Life in Poetry each in its own way has broadened the audience for poetry in America by making it accessible to those who have little non-compulsory experience

reading poems. These projects combat those New Critical paradigms of literary analysis with which most Americans are indoctrinated in their high school English classes, where bafflement frequently leads to indifference and word-weariness. Facing a challenge similar to the laureates', I wanted to instill in my students an understanding of not only how to read and appreciate poetry, but how to understand its various historical, social, and cultural contexts. Pinsky himself makes this connection between the laureateship and teaching, claiming that the "Poet Laureate's job...is more like teaching than writing. Like teaching, it's a public job, a task located between you and other people" (par. 47). However, my charge as an instructor differs from the laureates' in that I must show students how to render their understanding and appreciation of poetry in a discourse suitable for the world of higher education. That is, I must teach them not only to think but to write critically.

Among other things, critical thinking and critical writing are self-directed and self-disciplined. In order to cultivate critical thinking, whether in a student of the humanities or the natural sciences, before implications, concepts, and interpretations can emerge, we must contend with the self. It matters very little if a student writes a cogent, well-reasoned essay if we as instructors provide all the direction and discipline for them. Moreover, is it not a commonsensical assumption that all of us learn better when we have more than a merely academic goal, but indeed a personal one as well? The purposes of any academic activity will remain in our lives and continue to inform our thinking only if they are as much affective as intellectual. Contending with affect, of course,

risks letting the classroom lapse into either therapy session or purposeless egocentrism, but in my experience students understand that personal expression must serve a purpose. Moreover, students more often than not err on the side of (at least ostensible) objectivity, having been frequently warned against the supposed dangers of the vertical pronoun. All of this is simply to say that in order for critical thinking to “stick” in our students’ minds and thus become a habit of thought (and not simply something dutifully and obediently done to please an instructor), asking them to begin with and incorporate what actually matters to them in their lives proves in the end more effectual than reducing them to regurgitative robots programmed to hammer out another dreary paper for credit.

Even students who harbor a genuine desire to connect with literature and want a more critical understanding of it often enter the classroom already cowed, having perhaps been browbeaten in high school, instructed in ways that place literature ever out of reach on its canonical pedestal. They have been taught to search for symbolism and “hidden meanings” lurking in poems and stories and plays. Perhaps of all the genres we regularly teach in contemporary American literature courses, poetry—because of its condensed language and its sometimes elliptical meanings—is the most intimidating, the least accessible, and therefore the most difficult to teach. Though by now MacLeish’s post-Imagist dictum that “A poem should not mean / But be” is old hat, it is a good place to start with our students, requiring us simply to shift the burden of making meaning from the poet to the student. That is, instead of asking students “What does this mean?” we should ask “What do you make of this?” This interrogative shift lies at

the heart of all student-centered pedagogies, and without first achieving such a shift, without bringing poetry down from its pedestal so that those uninitiated into the small professional microcosm of poetry (and literary criticism, for that matter), we risk reifying poetry's untouchability, instilling or reaffirming in our students the belief that poems are simply a series of inaccessible high-minded riddles, or logic puzzles that can only be understood by "breaking them down." None of which is to say that serious analysis, i.e., breaking things down, is unimportant. Rather, what I mean to emphasize here is the need to be able to put the pieces back together again as well, to understand a poem and not simply its paraphrase. What follows is a description of the journeys of critical and creative self-discovery a few students in my Laureate class embarked upon as a result of my insistence that they bring poetry down and make it matter to them in integral ways beyond the classroom.

Poetry and Plums

Let me begin by recounting a particularly astute student's progress. I say "progress" because even though Michele entered my class able to write well, equipped with the fundamentals of academic discourse, she had, as she explains in a reflective introduction to her final portfolio, "already...decide[d] that I was not to have a relationship with poetry." She believed that "anyone, once properly educated, can write academically," but she wanted to "develop a more natural voice" because "this is the only way to produce extraordinary written work." Note here that Michele's *desire* to write something extraordinary is half the battle in any classroom. As a result of trying to cultivate her voice, she found herself

“identifying with my favorite poets and poems, championing the value of poetry to those who have not experienced it, and reading poetry outside of assignments.”

Regardless of the success or failure of Michele’s essays (and setting aside the possibly obsequious admission of “reading outside of assignments”), this identification with and championing of poetry represents a vital first step in critical thinking because suddenly it is self-directed and matters to her personally.

In her essay “Poetry and Plums,” Michele offers a synopsis of her journey toward identification: “Somewhere between kindergarten and high school, without warning, poetry became important. It appeared in unrecognizable forms, void of rhyme and predictability. And most intimidating of all, it was drenched with importance, insisting on its significance.” Given her self-professed “teenage mentality” of being “too cool” for school, “poetry stood no chance.” Moreover, because “[h]igh school encouraged the interpretation and analysis of poetry” and taught students that “each poem had a specific and distinct message that should not be misconstrued,” Michele feared and hated poetry’s “ability to make fools of us.”

Though this story is all too common among students, her story is also unique, peculiar to her social and cultural experiences. Born and raised in Georgia, Michele transferred from the University of Alabama to Binghamton University in upstate New York, a fact that necessarily informs her thinking and subsequent education and that she not only recognizes but embraces as an appropriate critical and poetic lens. “Now at twenty years of age,” she writes, “a peach among apples...I look for meaning in the blank of snow on the ground, the

yellow shirt I wore when I sat in the corner...and used the walls to bounce my ideas off.” But her poetic search for meaning in the mundane things of her life is not the egocentric solipsism that might otherwise stunt truly critical thinking. Rather, she understands that “I am but a part of a web of significance.” And in this moment of the expansion of her social self, Michele begins to understand what is for her the function of poetry: “Poetry doesn’t help me to relax, giving me a break from reality, the way it is often portrayed. Instead poetry ‘illuminates reality.’” Such a statement, while in itself apt if not quite remarkable, becomes even more so when put into the context of her experience. That is, earlier in the semester, my students attended a poetry reading by then laureate Ted Kooser, who had come to Binghamton to accept the 2005 Milt Kessler Poetry Award for his book *Delights and Shadows*. The president of our university, before presenting Kooser with a plaque, offered her own poetics to the audience, claiming that the function of poetry in our lives is akin to classical music; it allows us to relax, be calm, and forget the worries of our hectic lives for a moment. Michele, while not directly quoting our president, is clearly expressing firm disagreement. If part of the role of a literature class is to get our students to join the public academic dialogue about the function of literature in the wider world, Michele has stepped intrepidly into that conversation.

In order to compel my students to step into these conversations authoritatively, one tactic that I have used in this and other classes has been to convince them that narrative is just as valid a form of thinking as argument, that by including story and being creative—

perhaps integrally, perhaps only tangentially—they can still write smart critical essays. The challenge, for them, then becomes recognizing that simply because an essay embraces narrative, its success still requires careful attention to clarity, focus, and organization.

Michele uses narrative in this way, not as a fluffy aside, and not solely for the sake of being creative, but to make a point central to her essay. While eating dinner with two friends in the dining hall, Michele tries to start a conversation about the poetry of Billy Collins, and as she begins to read a poem, her friend Christina interrupts, saying, “I don’t believe in poetry...I’m not going to argue with you...I don’t like poetry and you’re not going to convince me, so just stop.” Michele reflects on this vehement refusal to listen: “Did poetry attack Christina in her youth? Molest her?” A few nights later she gets the answer to her question. In a moment of difficult honesty, Christina admits that she has “always felt like I was just a little below everyone else. Academically, I was the worst of the best...Poetry, to me, represents that divide between the regular people and the elite.” Michele reflects on her friend’s fear: “It was as if poetry was this sneaky thing hiding, waiting to expose Christina for who she really was.” In an attempt to cheer Christina up, she “cut sparkling plums out of scrapbooking paper and...designed a small card with William Carlos Williams’ poem [“This is Just to Say”] on it for her.” Here Michele is, in a way, doing the job of a laureate, making poetry public, insofar as her circle of friends is public, and not allowing poetry to go unheeded, even by those who would rather not listen, because she believes

in its transformational power. “She’ll laugh at the insignificance of the plums,” Michele speculates, “but at least she’ll laugh.”

For Whoever Wants It!

I want to turn now to a second draft of an essay written by Maria, a young Puerto Rican woman whose first draft deeply disappointed me, not because the grammar strayed from standard English, not because the discussion of William Carlos Williams seemed naïve and unexamined, and not because it was two pages short and handed in late. Instead, I was disappointed because the essay appeared to be little more than a book-reportish biography with information culled from such scholarly sources as About.com and Wikipedia. In fact, a quick search on Google confirmed my suspicion that Maria had simply plagiarized the entire thing.

Some of my more jaded colleagues rail against the hubris and intellectual laziness of plagiarizers. Others note how plagiarism threatens to undermine the very principles of higher education. Most relish throwing the book (so to speak) at undergraduate offenders, failing them, reporting their misdeeds to our university’s academic honesty committee. But I *know* Maria. She is kind and conscientious. She is polite if a tad timid. And she is neither hubristic nor lazy. Indeed, more than anything else, I see in her face the fear of a first-generation college student and second-generation American. I see anxiety and read uneasiness in her English. Maria knows her grasp of the conventions of academic discourse is tenuous at best. She cheated because she is trying to survive in this world higher education.

At the end of the class period, when I handed back my students' first drafts, I asked Maria to stay behind for a minute so we could talk. She was nervous, of course, but I told her that I was choosing not to fail her or report her plagiarism. "But Maria," I said, "this is still a serious matter."

"I know and I'm sorry." Apology saddened her eyes, crumpled her brow, and she offered me many of the lame excuses we as instructors have heard all too often—*I ran out of time, my computer crashed, I didn't know this was plagiarism*. But such excuses never get to the heart of the matter because not even those making the excuses can fully articulate the reasons for their actions. And perhaps I am making overly-optimistic excuses for plagiarists, but the persistence of academic dishonesty compels me to investigate the phenomenon more compassionately, to scrutinize it as a curable disease rather than a character flaw or moral shortcoming, because the *impulse* to plagiarize seems central to so many other writerly missteps I find in student essays. Ultimately, plagiarists feel their own writing is inadequate. They feel they are not smart enough to write the kind of essay they think their teachers want to read. I say *feel* because plagiarism often seems to be an affective decision, as in Maria's case, and not an ethical one.

It strikes me as odd, but illustrative, that in the creative writing workshops I have taught, I have never come across a case of plagiarism. Students enter the workshop space fully expecting to create original writing, whether they are working on a poem, a story, or indeed an essay. They embrace their own authority, their own capacity to make sense of things. Perhaps it could be

argued that creative writing attracts a different kind of student, but in my experience the workshop is as diverse as any literature or composition course I have taught—majors, non-majors, ESL students, aspiring poets, those looking for an easy A—it is a perfectly representative cross-section of the university. I wonder, if Maria had been enrolled in my creative writing course, would she have plagiarized?

When I had asked my students weeks before to share with the rest of the class, one by one, the poet they would be writing about for their first essays, most were unsure. They admitted to not having read much poetry before, only the work I had exposed them to in recent weeks, so they seemed to be choosing at random, hoping they would happen upon someone whose poetry would prove to be interesting, or at least not entirely uninspiring. But Maria knew at once that she would focus on Williams. So when I confronted her about her plagiarized first draft, I asked, “Why did you want to write about Williams in the first place, Maria? You seemed so sure about your choice.” Her answer was a narrative about her semi-estranged working-class father, Gustavo, who had been inspired in school by an English teacher, herself a Latina of Puerto Rican descent. This teacher told Maria’s young father that perhaps he would be interested in the half-Latino poet William Carlos Williams. As Maria tells it, Gustavo “found his way to the public library, carrying the crumpled piece of paper with William Carlos Williams scribbled across it,” where he gorged on *Al Que Quiere!*—indeed, as Maria would learn, poetry itself is *For Whoever Wants It!*—before moving eagerly on to *Paterson, Spring and All*, and *Kora in Hell*. This narrative would form the

basis of her second draft, an essay now called “Me, My Father, and William Carlos Williams.”

The essay is something that only Maria could have written, an exploratory journey that begins with her having to undergo emergency surgery during Spring Break. “As I was admitted to the hospital in preparation for my surgery, the topic of this class was very much with me, in the strangest of ways. I awkwardly lay in the emergency room cot, and my father, who I see at most once a month since my parents separated over three years ago, sat next to me holding my hand, just as awkwardly.” It is this very awkwardness I find so heartening, this somewhat painful honesty, the courage Maria found to write about not just the poetry of Williams, but something that really matters to her—her relationship with her father. “In a weak attempt to make conversation,” she goes on, “I commented on a hard cover book lying on his lap.” This conversation initiates a creative and critical self-examination that revolves around modern American poetry, but is finally about Maria herself. Later, she admits to being nervous about talking with her father because their relationship had deteriorated so much in recent years. “However, little did I know I would be embarking on a journey to my early childhood.” The essay has no true thesis because the ultimate point is not singular but manifold. Its organization meanders but proclaims its own authority and asserts its right to personal narrative. In this way, she brought poetry down from its pedestal and engaged it on the level of real experience.

Highly Sensitive People

Kris is a poet, so I suspected hers would be one of the more interesting essays, or at least one of the more linguistically playful of the bunch. She had trouble in this class because of her painful shyness, having skipped out on a mandatory classroom presentation. I could see that she was always alert, taking notes, attentive to the discussion, but rarely did she ever make so much as a peep. Her eyes responded, though, even if her voice did not. Others in the class, no doubt, thought she was uninterested, bored, or perhaps stupid, but I know from her journal responses that Kris is a thoughtful and insightful student. Her essay “The Voice of the Silent Poet” is more complex than I expect of student writing, weaving her examination of Louise Glück’s poetry with her own troubled past, her subsequent social anxiety, and her self-described “severe insecurity complex.” The essay begins like a good short story: “I was arrested in high school for shoplifting. But I was underage, so it didn’t really matter until I was sent to the emergency room, just over the eighteen-year cap, for drinking one too many vodka tonics and smoking a little too much marijuana. Oops.” Kris announces her presence with a straightforward conversational voice and flourishes with the final playful punch-line: Oops. Later in the essay, she compares her own disposition, as a person and as a poet, to the media-shy Glück: “To an onlooker, we appear despondent, aloof, lacking personality,” but inside all that silence, a poet, a person lives, watching the world and making meaning out of it.

Kris later echoes Whitman's poetics when she writes, "Hello, I am poetry. It's my lungs, it's my breath, it's my veins." This confident self-proclamation is exactly the kind of authority from which great writing emerges, but I doubt that she could have written this exploratory lyrical essay without the freedom to take chances. Like Maria's essay about her father, Kris's wanders about, risks confusion, but in the end it succeeds because she has given herself permission to be honest with herself and her readers. When her therapist asks her what she wants to do with her life, Kris answers, "I want to be a poet," to which the therapist smiles and explains that "I am what the medical world refers to as a Highly Sensitive Person."

Highly Sensitive People might experience social anxiety and emotional pain, but they also see the world in different and important ways that too often get erased in our classrooms. "For a long time," Kris writes, "I thought everybody thought about minutes in terms of lines in poems. Moments are like lost children whose home is a poem—it's where they belong, and I thought it was everyone's responsibility to ensure they get to where they're supposed to be." Cogent student writing like this always makes me happy as a teacher, but rarely am I struck by the literary beauty, the attention to rhythm and diction, and the aptness of metaphor I see in Kris's essay. Do not all students have this capacity, though? To see literature and the world as worthy of writing about honestly and beautifully?

Making it Matter

What Michele, Maria, and Kris were all able to do was approach poetry not as something to fear and avoid but as something they have the ability and right to connect with. Though I could report a number of noble failures in this class, I could equally recount a number of other successful student transformations, by which I mean to evoke a Freirean approach to learning, in which the goal is for students to take control of their lives, carrying their educations out into the world in order to make critically informed decisions that will effect social change. Though the context of the literature classroom differs markedly from Freire's literacy program in Brazil, the principle remains applicable that genuine critical learning can take place only insofar as students become subjects rather than objects of education.

At the end of "Poetry and Plums," Michele makes it clear that she has become a subject of her own education, finishing her essay with a grand rhetorical flourish. She composes a long list of things she believes in: "the abolition of clichés," "that poetry is all around us, and that in fact we are poetry," "that language is often used to cover up what we are really thinking because to speak honestly is to reveal something intimate about ourselves, our beliefs, and our worldviews," "the avoidance of sameness," "that poetry is an effective form of rebellion and protest." Michele's movement here is from language to the pragmatics of language, ending with a call for social action through poetic language. In fact, earlier in the essay Michele discusses Martín Espada's political poetics (or poetic politics) of activism in the context of her own decision

to leave her southern university in protest over what she perceived to be unjust race relations. Like a laureate, she has found a way to make poetry matter in a vital way, connecting it to real life, bringing it down to the level of the concrete everyday for the sake of such lofty American abstractions as democracy, justice, freedom. Poetry “belongs in our newspapers,” she writes, “in our away-messages, and on our tombstones.” I can think of no better way than this to teach poetry and make it matter.

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