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A CRITIC AT LARGE

SHOW OR TELL

Should creative writing be taught?

by Louis Menand

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Before the program era: Robert Frost (second from left), the world's first writer-in-residence, at Bread Loaf.

Creative-writing programs are designed on the theory that students who have never published a poem can teach other students who have never published a poem how to write a publishable poem. The fruit of the theory is the writing workshop, a combination of ritual scarring and twelve-on-one group therapy where aspiring writers offer their views of the efforts of other aspiring writers. People who take creative-writing workshops get course credit and can, ultimately, receive an academic degree in the subject; but a workshop is not a course in the normal sense—a scene of instruction in which some body of knowledge is transmitted by means of a curricular script. The workshop is a process, an unscripted performance space, a regime for forcing people to do two things that are fundamentally contrary to human nature: actually write stuff (as opposed to planning to write stuff very, very soon), and then sit there while strangers tear it apart. There is one person in the room, the instructor, who has (usually) published a poem. But workshop protocol requires the instructor to shepherd the discussion, not to lead it, and in any case the instructor is either a product of the same process—a person with an academic degree in creative writing—or a successful writer who has had no training as a teacher of anything, and who is probably grimly or jovially skeptical of the premise on which the whole enterprise is based: that creative writing is something that can be taught.

This skepticism is widely shared, and one way for creative-writing programs to handle it is simply to concede the point. The University of Iowa Writers' Workshop is the most renowned creative-writing program in the world. Sixteen Pulitzer Prize winners and three recent Poet Laureates are graduates of the program. But the school's official position is that the school had nothing to do with it. "The fact that the Workshop can claim as alumni nationally and internationally prominent poets, novelists, and short story writers is, we believe, more the result of what they brought here than of what they gained from us," the Iowa Web site explains. Iowa merely admits people who are really good at writing; it puts them up for two years; and then, like the Wizard of Oz, it gives them a diploma. "We continue to look for the most promising talent in the country," the school says, "in our conviction that writing cannot be taught but that writers can be encouraged."

"A nice conviction if you can afford it" might be the response of faculty working in less prestigious programs, and not everyone who teaches creative writing agrees about the irrelevance of the job. Some writers do seem to make it a matter of principle to bite the hand that writes the checks. Allen Tate, the poet and critic, complained that "the academically certified Creative Writer goes out to teach Creative Writing, and produces other Creative Writers who are not writers, but who produce still other Creative Writers who are not writers." Tate ran the creative-writing program at Princeton, where John Berryman was a colleague. Kay Boyle once published a piece arguing that "all creative-writing programs ought to be abolished by law." She taught creative writing for sixteen years at San Francisco State.

Other writers, though, are very much with the program. John Barth taught for twenty-two years in the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins, one of the oldest and most luminous programs in the country. In 1985, he published an article in the *Times Book Review* entitled "Writing: Can It Be Taught?," to which his answer was that it emphatically can, mainly on the ground that it so emphatically is. (He added the standard "genius" exception: "Not even in America can one major in Towering Literary Artistry.")

A few writing instructors have changed their minds. When Barth wrote his piece for the *Times*, he might have been recalling a speech given three years earlier by one of the leading figures in the field, R. V. Cassill. Verlin Cassill was a novelist and short-story writer who graduated from Iowa in 1939 and returned after the war to get an M.A. and to teach in the Writers' Workshop. One of his students was Margaret Walker, an African-American, who was the author of "Jubilee" (1966)—the first of the so-called neo-slave narratives, of which the most famous is Toni Morrison's "Beloved." ("Jubilee" was Walker's Ph.D. thesis; for the project, Cassill made her read Henry James, who, in those days, was considered a universal "writer's writer," even for a woman writing a novel about slavery and Reconstruction.) Cassill wrote a standard textbook, "Writing Fiction"; he was the editor of "The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction," a position of power in the field; and, from 1966 until his retirement, in 1983, he taught creative writing at Brown, another program with a distinguished history. In 1967, shortly after arriving at Brown and just at the start of a boom in university-based creative-writing programs, he founded the Associated Writing Programs, the professional association of academic creative writers.

But at a convention in Boston on the fifteenth anniversary of the A.W.P. Cassill stunned the membership by suggesting that the organization should be disbanded. He thought that writers had become complicit in the academic logrolling and gamesmanship of publish-or-perish: using other people's money—grants from their universities and from arts agencies—they devised ways to get their own and one another's work into print, and then converted those publications into salary increments (which is apparently how Cassill thought that most professors operate). They wrote poems to get raises. The academic system was corrupting, and it was time for the writers to get out. "We are now at the point where writing programs are poisoning, and in turn we are being poisoned by, departments and institutions on which we have fastened them," he said. The speech got attention, but the A.W.P. did not disband. It eventually renamed itself the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, and it now has more than twenty-five thousand members. Around the time that Cassill delivered his renunciation, there were seventy-nine degree programs in creative writing in the United States. Today, there are eight hundred and twenty-two. Thirty-seven of these award the Ph.D.

Mark McGurl doesn't mention Cassill's speech in his book about creative-writing programs and American

fiction, “The Program Era” (Harvard; \$35), but it fits his argument perfectly. The argument is that teaching creative writing should always be a scandal, since it’s a scandal that suits everyone. It allows people in creative-writing departments to feel that, unlike their colleagues in the traditional academic disciplines, they are not cogs in a knowledge machine; and it allows the university to regard itself as what McGurl calls a “difference engine,” devoted to producing original people as well as original research. He points out that teachers in creative-writing programs were asking “Can it be taught?” right from the start, but that virtually no one has ever tried to lay down rules for what should go on in the classroom. This is because not having an answer to the “Can it be taught?” question—keeping alive the belief that all this training and socialization never really touches the heart of the imaginative process—is what marks creative-writing programs as “creative.” Academic creative-writing programs are, as McGurl puts it, examples of “the institutionalization of anti-institutionality.” That’s why institutions love them. They are the outside contained on the inside.

Still, the creative-writing program, unsystematic or even anti-system as it might believe itself to be, is a system. People go in at one end and they come out the other, bearing (like the Scarecrow) a piece of paper with a Latin inscription, but also bearing (unlike the Scarecrow) the impress of an institutional experience. The nature of that experience mutates as the folk wisdom of the workshop mutates—from “Show, don’t tell,” which was the mantra in the nineteen-forties and fifties, to the effectively opposite mantra “Find your voice,” which took over in the nineteen-sixties and seventies. McGurl suggests that these mantras encode shifting patterns of cultural assumptions—about identity, about work, about gender and class, and, of course, about what counts as good writing—and that they have had a big effect on the stories and novels that American writers have produced. “The rise of the creative-writing program,” he says, “stands as the most important event in postwar American literary history.”

McGurl’s book is not a history of creative-writing programs. It’s a history of twentieth-century fiction, in which the work of American writers from Thomas Wolfe to Bharati Mukherjee is read as reflections of, and reflections on, the educational system through which so many writers now pass. (McGurl doesn’t deal with poetry.) As McGurl points out, the university is where most serious fiction writers have been produced since the Second World War. It has also been the place where most serious fiction readers are produced: they are taught how to read in departments of literature. McGurl’s claim is simple: given that most of the fiction that Americans write and read is processed through the higher-education system, we ought to pay some attention to the way the system affects the outcome.

This may sound like a formula for debunking, but it’s not. “The Program Era” is an impressive and imaginative book. It does three things unusually well. First, it interprets works of fiction as what philosophers of language call illocutionary acts. The meaning of one of Raymond Carver’s stories is not only what the story says; it’s also the way the story says it. The form of a Carver short story—ostentatiously brief, emotionally hyper-defended—expresses something. McGurl thinks that the style represents the “aestheticization of shame, a mode of self-retraction.” Literary minimalism like Carver’s—McGurl calls it “lower-middle-class modernism”—is a means of reducing the risk of embarrassing oneself, and is one way that students from working-class backgrounds, like Carver (he was from Oregon, where his father was a sawmill worker), deal with the highbrow world of the academy.

Rather ingeniously, McGurl reads the work of Carver’s exact contemporary Joyce Carol Oates as an expression of the same class-based self-consciousness. (He notes that Carver once called Oates the most important writer of his generation.) Oates is a prolific practitioner of what McGurl calls “maximalist” fiction: it has been said that, at one point in her career, she wrote forty pages of fiction every day, or about a quarter of what would constitute an entire book for Carver. But McGurl thinks that maximalism, too, is “a way of shielding oneself with words.” The two styles are methods of self-protection and, at the same time, forms of self-assertion: the minimalist writer puts his craft on display, the maximalist his facility.

Carver and Oates are both program products. Oates is from a poor family—she once described herself as “of peasant stock”—in upstate New York. She came out of the undergraduate creative-writing program at Syracuse, where she studied with Donald Dike, and she has spent most of her career teaching at Princeton, where Morrison, until her recent retirement, was also on the faculty. In Carver’s case, the career constitutes a virtual *tour d’horizon* of the creative-writing scene. Carver started as a correspondence student in an outfit known as the Palmer Institute of

Authorship. He took classes at Chico State, in California, with the novelist John Gardner; at Humboldt State College, with the short-story writer Richard Cortez Day; at Sacramento State College, with the poet Dennis Schmitz; and at Stanford, where he was a Wallace Stegner Fellow; and he taught at the Iowa Writers' Workshop with John Cheever. His second marriage was to another creative-writing professional, the poet Tess Gallagher, and he ended up as a professor at Oates's alma mater, Syracuse, where Jay McInerney was his student. The beat goes on—McGurl's point.

A second thing that "The Program Era" does well, and sometimes entertainingly, is to treat the world of creative writing as an ant farm, in which the writer-ants go about busily executing the tasks they have been programmed for. Writing is a technology, after all, and there is a sense in which human beings who write can be thought of as writing machines. They get tooled in certain ways, and the creative-writing program is a means of tooling. But McGurl treats creative writing as an ant farm where the ants are extremely interesting. He never reduces writers to unthinking products of a system. They are thinking products of a system. After all, few activities make people more self-conscious than participating in a writing workshop. Reflecting on yourself—your experience, your "voice," your background, your talent or lack of it—is what writing workshops make people do.

McGurl thinks that this habit of self-observation is not restricted to writing programs. He thinks that we're all highly self-conscious ants, because that's what it means to be a modern person. Constant self-assessment and self-reflection are part of our program. (McGurl uses the term "reflexive modernity." There is a lot of critical techno-speak in "The Program Era," it's true. There are also flow charts and the like, diagrams suited to systems analysis. If you don't enjoy this sort of thing, you will not get very far into the book. It's worth learning to enjoy, though.)

So the fiction that comes out of creative-writing programs may appeal to readers because it rehearses topics—"Who am I?" issues—that are already part of their inner lives. And contemporary fiction does have many readers. McGurl argues that, far from homogenizing literature or turning it into an academic exercise, creative-writing programs have been a success on purely literary grounds. "There has been a system-wide rise in the excellence of American literature in the postwar period," he says, and he offers the same proof that Barth offered in his *Times* article: there is more good fiction out there than anyone has time to read. The system must be doing something right.

The third accomplishment of "The Program Era" is almost inadvertent. Changes in creative-writing programs are influenced by changes in two related bodies of thought, both of which try to answer the question "How can we make people more productive and more creative?" These are the philosophy of education and management theory. Creative-writing courses follow naturally from the "learning by doing" theories of progressive education: they add practical, hands-on experience to traditional book learning. And, as McGurl suggests, presenting a story in a writing workshop is a little like making a business presentation in a corporate workplace. Such a presentation is, on some level, what he calls "a presentation of individual excellence," a means by which we observe and test ourselves. It helps us measure how we're doing in the human race.

The unexpected result of combining a history of creative fiction writing with a history of education and management theory is a kind of slide show of postwar American life. "The Program Era" evokes a sense of how life felt in the nineteen-sixties, when Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters took their bus trip (a writers' workshop on the road), and a sense of how life felt in the nineteen-seventies, when Carver was writing his bleak little stories. And this helps McGurl to make a larger point, which is that university creative-writing programs don't isolate writers from the world. On the contrary, university creative-writing courses situate writers in the world that most of their readers inhabit—the world of mass higher education and the white-collar workplace. Sticking writers in a garret would isolate them. Putting them in the ivory tower puts them in touch with real life.

Is the rise of the creative-writing workshop, as McGurl claims, "the most important event in postwar American literary history"? Creative-writing courses did not suddenly spring into being in 1945. A course called Verse Making was available at Iowa in 1897, and from 1906 to 1925 George Pierce Baker taught a drama workshop at Harvard, the first graduate writing course in the country; Thomas Wolfe took it. The term (and the concept) "creative

writing” dates from the nineteen-twenties, which is when Middlebury started the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference, where Robert Frost served as the world’s first writer-in-residence. In 1936, Iowa launched the Writers’ Workshop—officially, the Program in Creative Writing—under the direction of Wilbur Schramm, and began awarding the first M.F.A.s. In 1941, Schramm was replaced by Paul Engle, a prodigious creative-writing proselytizer and cultural Cold Warrior, who made Iowa into a global power in the field. Engle eventually brought writers from seventy countries to study at Iowa.

There was a surge in creative-writing degree programs after the Second World War. The Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins started in 1947; Stanford inaugurated its writing fellowships the same year; Cornell’s creative-writing program opened in 1948. As is the case with most new developments in higher education, changes in funding were responsible. Title II of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944—the G.I. Bill—provided forty-eight months of tuition for veterans who enrolled in colleges and universities. More than two million veterans, a much bigger number than anticipated, took up the offer, and by 1950 the government had spent more money on tuition and other college costs than on the Marshall Plan. The key requirement of Title II was that the tuition assistance be used only for study in degree or certificate programs, which is why creative-writing courses grew into degree-granting creative-writing programs.

In the nineteen-sixties, the universe of higher education underwent a fantastic expansion. Between 1960 and 1969, enrollments doubled and more professors were hired than had been hired in the entire previous three hundred and twenty-five years. Most of the growth was in the public sector. At the height of the expansion, between 1965 and 1972, new community-college campuses were opening in the United States at the rate of one every week. A way for institutions to raise their academic profiles was to add graduate programs. (Once added, they became virtually impossible to subtract. This is one reason that there is an oversupply of Ph.D.s in the United States.) By 1975, there were fifteen creative-writing M.F.A. programs in the country. Today, there are a hundred and fifty-three. Creative-writing programs attract students (good for public universities, where enrollment may determine budgets), but, contrary to what many people assume, they are not generally cash cows. Most of the top programs—until recently, Columbia was the major exception—provide fellowship support for all their students, and the classes are tiny. In 2005-06, only four-tenths of one per cent of all master’s degrees awarded were in creative writing.

The identification of certain writers with university creative-writing programs is, therefore, a postwar phenomenon. The list is long: John Hawkes (Brown), Guy Davenport (Kentucky), Robert Coover (Brown), Reynolds Price (Duke), Wallace Stegner (Stanford), Leslie Epstein (Boston University), Donald Barthelme (Houston), Tobias Wolff (Syracuse), E. L. Doctorow (New York University), William Kennedy (SUNY Albany), Robert Olen Butler (Florida State University). And many writers who are not normally imagined in an academic setting have circulated through the creative-writing system. Philip Roth has taught at several universities, including Iowa and Princeton. Kurt Vonnegut and Nelson Algren both taught at Iowa. (Algren claimed to find writing programs worthless. He later complained, in a piece called “At Play in the Fields of Hackademe,” that “what it lacks in creativity, the Iowa Creative Workshop makes up in quietivity.” He is reported to have lost a lot of money playing poker while he was in Iowa City.)

And it is remarkable how many fiction writers have come through university writing programs since the war—not just individual writers but entire cohorts. When Vonnegut was at Iowa, he taught a class that included John Casey, Gail Godwin, Andre Dubus, and John Irving. Ken Kesey, Robert Stone, Wendell Berry, Larry McMurtry, Ernest Gaines (“The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman”), and Tillie Olsen were all in a creative-writing workshop at Stanford at the same time. Michael Chabon, Alice Sebold, and Richard Ford (a student of Doctorow, before Doctorow went to N.Y.U.) are products of the program at the University of California at Irvine. Susan Minot, Rick Moody, Tama Janowitz, and Mona Simpson all went to Columbia.

The absorption of fiction writing into the university has a lot to do with the emergence of robust traditions (as opposed to scattered works) of so-called multicultural literature. As McGurl notes, virtually all the major figures in Latino literature have been American academics. The same is true of Asian-American novelists, many of whom have held university appointments, and of Native American writers. N. Scott Momaday was a student of

Stegner's at Stanford, which is where he began work on his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, "House Made of Dawn" (1968).

These writers have a special relation to the "outside contained on the inside" feature of academic creative-writing programs, and many of the most celebrated have been accused of inauthenticity. McGurl tells the story of the attack on Momaday's "House Made of Dawn" by Karl Kroeber. Kroeber is not a Native American; he is a professor of English at Columbia whose many interests include Native American literature, and he criticized Momaday for attempting to "evoke an 'Indianness' for his readers (the majority of whom will presumably not be Indians) through an Anglo-American literary structure that must prohibit any authentically Indian imaginative form." Native American literature can be taught in a university, in other words, but Native American literature should not be written in a university.

Authenticity is a snark—although someone will always go hunting for it. McGurl's response to Kroeber is sensible: since Momaday is a Native American, and since he developed his literary style by studying white modernist writers at Stanford and other universities, "rather than being contaminated by modernism, Indian art now *includes* modernism as one of its elements." As McGurl points out, the horses that the Plains Indians rode when they hunted, so picturesquely, the buffalo were European imports.

And though some readers are devoted to fiction about ethnic minorities because it tells "their story," there is a degree to which such literature is for outsiders, a variety of anthropology in which natives "inform" on their own cultures to literary tourists. The rest of the natives are often not thrilled to find their practices paraded before the gaze of outsiders. "To celebrate one's family to the maximum, to put them proudly and visibly into print, might require betraying them to the eyes of an alien observer we might call 'America,'" as McGurl puts it. "Portnoy's Complaint" is a case in point. All literature about an ethnic minority by members of that ethnic minority is, potentially, a *shanda fur die goyim*. More striking is that writing of this kind coming out of creative-writing programs today is the subject matter of literature and ethnic-studies departments tomorrow. Universities have become restaurants that bake their own bread.

The creative-writing program is an American invention, and it has recently become an American export. The British were at first contemptuous of the idea of creative-writing courses; they regarded them, as the critic and novelist Malcolm Bradbury once put it, as being "like the hamburger—a vulgar hybrid which, as everyone once knew, no sensible person would ever eat." The first British master's-degree program in creative writing opened in 1970. Bradbury and Angus Wilson set it up. (Bradbury taught Ian McEwan.) The first undergraduate degree program was not instituted until 1991. But the vulgar hybrid has spread. McGurl reports that there are now writing programs in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Israel, Mexico, South Korea, and the Philippines.

Still, the rise of creative-writing programs does not explain everything about postwar fiction, and there are some obvious limitations to McGurl's argument, which he tends to acknowledge in the abstract but to ignore in the particular analysis. Plenty of postwar writers, from J. D. Salinger and Vladimir Nabokov to Thomas Pynchon, had little or nothing to do with writing programs. (Nabokov taught a course on the novel at Cornell, in which Pynchon was a student, but he never taught creative writing. Harvard once considered hiring Nabokov to teach literature; Roman Jakobson, then a professor of linguistics there, is supposed to have asked whether the university was also prepared to hire an elephant to teach zoology.)

Writers are products of educational systems, but stories are products of magazine editorial practices and novels are products of publishing houses. Carver's minimalism was shaped by his editor, Gordon Lish, whom he met in Palo Alto in the nineteen-sixties. As an editor at *Esquire* and Knopf, Lish (who attended Andover) put a highly identifiable impress on American fiction, some of it by writers of lower-middle-class origin and some not. Robert Gottlieb, at Simon & Schuster, Knopf, and *The New Yorker*, surely had as much influence on the fiction that was written and published in the postwar period as anyone who taught at Iowa or Stanford.

McGurl is not interested in the effects of individual teachers and editors, though; he's interested in the effects of systems. But magazines can be regarded as systems for processing fiction. And writers who have moved in and out of the institutions of journalism during their careers—Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe—reflect the experience in their fiction. Their novels are often staged either as a privileged type of reporting, writing

that is somehow both faithful to and superior to the canons of traditional journalism, or as dramatizations of the emptied-out subjectivity of the reporter persona—the fly on the wall, the view from nowhere.

Most readers of “The Program Era” are likely to be persuaded that the creative-writing-program experience has had an effect on many American fiction writers. Does this mean that creative writing can, in fact, be taught? What is usually said is that you can’t teach inspiration, but you can teach craft. What counted as craft for James, though, was very different from what counted as craft for Hemingway. What counts as craft for Ann Beattie (who teaches at the University of Virginia) must be different from what counts as craft for Jonathan Safran Foer (who teaches at N.Y.U.). There is no “craft of fiction” as such.

And, even on the level of “just getting people to write,” different writers, when confronted with the blank page, have different modes of attack. “Revise!” is the war cry of all writing classes. David Morley’s advice in “The Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing” (2007) represents the orthodoxy: “Write any sort of rubbish that covers the outlines of what you intend: the plot outline; character sketches; description; a hackneyed sestina. Begin by freewriting and free-associating sentences until some patterns emerge that begin to intrigue you solely for the sound they make, their rustle of possibility.” It’s a method that generates copy for a class to chew on, but writing that way is like throwing a lot of bricks on a pile and then being asked to organize them into a house. Surely the goal should be to get people to learn to think *while* they’re writing, not after they have written.

No one seems to agree on what the goal of good writing is, anyway. Stegner was an Iowa product, possibly the first person ever to receive a degree in creative writing. He founded the program at Stanford by persuading a wealthy oilman to fund a place where returning veterans who wanted to write could get away from their families and hang out. Stegner believed that the purpose of writing was to give readers what he called an “intense acquaintance” with the author. “The work of art is not a gem, as some schools of criticism would insist, but truly a lens,” he explained in an essay published in 1950. “We look through it for the purified and honestly offered spirit of the artist.”

John Gardner, another workshop legend and Iowa graduate, took a different view of the business. He believed in what he called a “fictional dream,” a vivid, continuous, and believable alternate reality. His book “The Art of Fiction,” published posthumously in 1983 (he died in a motorcycle accident in 1982), concludes with a list of writing exercises, such as:

2. Take a simple event: A man gets off a bus, trips, looks around in embarrassment, and sees a woman smiling. . . . Describe this event, using the same characters and elements of setting, in five completely different ways.

4b. Describe a lake as seen by a young man who has just committed murder. Do not mention the murder.

4c. Describe a landscape as seen by a bird. Do not mention the bird.

27. Using all you know, write a short story about an animal—for instance, a cow.

No doubt Gardner had success with this method of instruction, but the exercises have nothing to do with establishing an “intense acquaintance.” They are about acquiring a knack for adopting different styles and assuming different points of view. And for many writers writing is a job, or a way to escape from oneself. Those writers would not be happy in a Stegner workshop.

On the other hand, Gardner was a flamboyant and intensely personal teacher. His preferred pedagogical venue was the cocktail party, where he would station himself in the kitchen, near the ice trays, and consume vodka by the bottle while holding forth to the gathered disciples. Stegner, on the other hand, hated informality and disruption. He quit Stanford after students in the nineteen-sixties insisted on lying on the floor, and he resented the fact that he was famous for having been the teacher of Ken Kesey. Personality is a job requirement for the workshop teacher, and it doesn’t matter what sort. Teachers are the books that students read most closely, and this is especially true in the case of teachers who are living models for exactly what the student aspires one day to be—a published writer.

Writing teachers may therefore cultivate their own legends. Once, on the first day of class, Angela Carter, who taught at Brown, was asked by a student what her own writing was like. She carefully answered as follows: “My work cuts like a steel blade at the base of a man’s penis.” The course turned out not to be oversubscribed. One of Rick Moody’s teachers at Columbia asked the class to indicate, by a show of hands, how many found Moody’s work boring. Donald Barthelme, at Houston, assigned students to buy a bottle of wine and stay up all night drinking it while producing an imitation of John Ashbery’s “Three Poems.” Lish taught private writing classes that lasted from six to ten hours, a little like est training. He had students read their stories aloud to the group, and would order them to stop as soon as he disliked what he was hearing. Many students never got past the first sentence.

All scenes of instruction contain the potential for transference, and the workshop format seems almost deliberately designed for it. Writing instructors have techniques for stimulating production, exercises for developing an awareness of how literature works, formulas encapsulating their particular notions of craft. But the path of transmission cannot be smooth. “I could write nothing that pleased Lowell,” Philip Levine complained about a workshop that he had taken with Robert Lowell at Iowa. “Arbitrary, petty, and cruel” is the way one of Lowell’s students at Harvard described him. The writing instructor’s arbitrariness is like the psychoanalyst’s silence: the blander the screen, the more elusive the approval, the harder students will work to be recognized.

For, in spite of all the reasons that they shouldn’t, workshops work. I wrote poetry in college, and I was in a lot of workshops. I was a pretty untalented poet, but I was in a class with some very talented ones, including Garrett Hongo, who later directed the creative-writing program at the University of Oregon, and Brenda Hillman, who teaches in the M.F.A. program at St. Mary’s College, in California. Our teacher was a kind of Southern California Beat named Dick Barnes, a sly and wonderful poet who also taught medieval and Renaissance literature, and who could present well the great stone face of the hard-to-please. I’m sure that our undergraduate exchanges were callow enough, but my friends and I lived for poetry. We read the little magazines—*Kayak* and *Big Table* and *Lillabulero*—and we thought that discovering a new poet or a new poem was the most exciting thing in the world. When you are nineteen years old, it can be.

Did I engage in self-observation and other acts of modernist reflexivity? Not much. Was I concerned about belonging to an outside contained on the inside? I don’t think it ever occurred to me. I just thought that this stuff mattered more than anything else, and being around other people who felt the same way, in a setting where all we were required to do was to talk about each other’s poems, seemed like a great place to be. I don’t think the workshops taught me too much about craft, but they did teach me about the importance of making things, not just reading things. You care about things that you make, and that makes it easier to care about things that other people make.

And if students, however inexperienced and ignorant they may be, care about the same things, they do learn from each other. I stopped writing poetry after I graduated, and I never published a poem—which places me with the majority of people who have taken a creative-writing class. But I’m sure that the experience of being caught up in this small and fragile enterprise, contemporary poetry, among other people who were caught up in it, too, affected choices I made in life long after I left college. I wouldn’t trade it for anything. ♦

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