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Poetry and Pedagogy in The Great White North

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Article abstract

Stan Dragland presents a possible pedagogy for the teaching of poetry, one that involves creative writing and reading as its central tenets. The suggested pedagogical approach -- one that champions neither traditional forms nor open filed poetry exclusively -- is firmly grounded in a Canadian cultural context, taking into account the image of Canada as cultural shape-shifter as well as what Don McKay refers to as "wilderness" and others label "nordicity." At the same time, Dragland acknowledges the difficulties in transferring any pedagogical approach across individual instructors' differences, let alone institutional or cultural ones.

POETRY AND PEDAGOGY IN THE GREAT WHITE NORTH

Stan Dragland

This paper was delivered in April 1995 at the 10th Oxford Conference on the Teaching of Poetry, to which The British Council brought English teachers from all over the world. Most of them were facing the challenge of teaching standard British authors to non-native speakers in countries like India, Korea, Czechoslovakia, Argentina. What I took away from their papers, written out of such unpromising pedagogical circumstances, is what I hope they learned from mine: a sense of cultural context that was somehow all the more vivid for emerging from between the lines. I would have liked to report to the conference on contemporary Canadian poetry, but my style isn't epigrammatic enough to pack all that and also something on teaching into a 25-minute slot (including discussion). I did spare a few paragraphs to introduce my own culture in, rather than between, the lines.

In 1994 I taught for the first time a compulsory course which at Western is called Poetry and Prosody: metrics, stanza form, rhetoric. Teaching the course, I had to work against the grain. I know open form better, that is to say, and I gravitate towards it in my reading and writing. I'm lazy, also, and prefer to do only what comes naturally. But I respect traditional prosody, and I learn something every time I work with it. Not all of my students do. Some of them most definitely didn't last year. One of them (sotto voce, she thought) hated it out loud every little once in awhile. That shook me. How many students was this woman speaking for? Was I killing poetry for them?

I had no idea when I began teaching creative writing that what could certainly be taught in such classes was not writing but reading. This learning happens as a by-product of editing. Anyone who has worked like hell at teaching only to inspire hatred for the subject is naturally going to be fascinated by such effortless learning. In my paper, then, Creative Writing meets Poetry and Prosody, though the courses have not yet met in my real life and maybe never will. I'm not even sure I want them to, but I did want to imagine them together and the Oxford Conference seemed an ideal occasion for that.

*

I do not imagine that the exploration
ends, that she has yielded all her mystery
or that the map you hold
cancels further discovery

I tell you her uncovering takes years,
takes centuries, and when you find her naked
look again,
admit there is something else you cannot name,
a veil, a coating just above the flesh
which you cannot remove by your mere wish

when you see the land naked, look again
(burn your maps, that is not what I mean),
I mean the moment when it seems most plain
is the moment when you must begin again

Gwendolyn MacEwen, "The Discovery"

When I proposed this paper I intended to discuss the value of writing poetry for learning to read and analyse poetry and I intended also to report on the roots and the present state of Canadian poetry. Far too ambitious. I'll just sketch in the second subject at lightning speed. I need some of it for the first.

In contrast to our American neighbours, with their nation-making revolution (which we envy and disparage), Canada has quietly evolved into a nation without assuming firm cultural outlines. One consequence is an ingrained seam of self-deprecation. "Genius will never mount high, when the faculties of the mind are benumbed half the year," says a character in Frances Brooke's 1769 *The History of Emily Montague* remarking on our cold climate. We have an extensive literature of snow to refute her, but we do savour wit generated at our expense. The nation was 100 years old in 1967, but in literary terms we swung into post-colonial maturity only after the centennial. Then there was a proliferation of little magazines, publishing houses, anthologies, government granting bodies, literary unions and, especially, writing. For the first time, an avant-garde sprang up.

But who are we, really? One of our chief preoccupations, Canadian identity, might sound odd to most ancient countries, but it's not odd. Young nations, like young people, have doubts and

growing pains. They need to find themselves. Citizens need to feel that the body politic has a soul. The search for Canada's soul has taken us through conflicting versions of where it might be found: looking inward, attached to the land, or abroad, looking away beyond localism to what used to be called universals. The discovery of some answers has removed the "or" from between those alternatives. We have become a body with a soul that we think of as less banal if much less lively than that of our neighbours. American certainty about identity leaves many Americans incurious about the wider world. American ignorance about Canada is prodigious. It helps energize our determination to remain a true North American cultural alternative.

Canadian literature has come into its own still carrying an obsession with beginnings. Even our contemporary writers feel as though they have had to "incite a country to belong to" (Dennis Lee, "The Death of Harold Ladoo"). And now writers from Canadian First Nations are finding their voices, as are Canadian writers with roots in other cultures whose languages and identities had been all but assimilated by the uncertain national centre. The sense of newness, of volatile beginnings, is fed by many sources. We are a pluralist country in process. We have two founding nations, French and English, each with its own diverse literature. We have official policies of bilingualism and multiculturalism. We are a nation of immigrants, a hybrid dominion composed of elements from most of the cultures assembled at this conference. No wonder our profile is hard to sketch. My favourite comment on all this is by Robert Kroetsch:

> It may be that we survive by being skilful shape-changers. But more to the point, we survive by working with a low level of self-definition and national definition. We insist on staying multiple, and by that strategy we accommodate to our climate, our economic situation, and our neighbours.

This image of Canada as cultural shape-shifter is especially germane to my thoughts about writing and reading poetry. Lately I have been thinking of Canadian poetry as a high-energy verbal field with a wild heart, appropriate to a country in which raw nature is still so prominent. Don McKay, in an essay called "Local Wilderness," says that "Most people can sense, almost taste, that boundary in our minds and lives beyond which lies something completely other, something undomesticated by the mind's categories." He calls this untamed something "wilderness;" others

might call it nordicity, or simply North. "At a basic level," he goes on, "it may be seen as simply the persistence of otherness, the disturbing thrilling awareness that there really is a world outside language, which, creatures of language ourselves, we translate with difficulty."

As a reader of poetry I am beckoned by otherness, pushed or pulled by language where language does not go. Beyond culture into wilderness. The experience is neither new nor confined to Canada, of course. Robert Bringhurst has a more philosophical way of putting it:

> Poetry is knowing. Knowing is moving in tune with being. The implication is that what-is is neither formless nor still. . . . The Greek poets knew perfectly well that the *made form* of poetry is only the audible half of the conversation. The other half takes precedence. . . . In English, Robert Fitzgerald captures it best: "Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story". . . . Poets do not create poetry; the poetry is *there*, and poets answer it if they can.

I love these words and many others—prose and poetry—of Robert Bringhurst, even if reading them occasionally makes me feel like I've strayed into a church, because they address the commonplace mystery of poetry. Commonplace? Yes, it's commonly there in my reading of poetry. Mystery? Call it news from "Outside," as Jack Spicer did. Call it, with Denise Levertov,

> the multiform
> name of the Other, the known
> Unknown, unknowable. . . .

Call it what remains ungrasped after all the linguistic strategies at your disposal have been exhausted in the attempt to articulate the many things a poem makes you think and feel. "Works of art are of an infinite loneliness and with nothing to be so little appreciated as with criticism," says Rilke. "Only love can grasp and hold and fairly judge them." So much of this poetics of reach exceeding grasp sounds solemn and highfalutin that I have to say I also need it for poetry that is raunchy, low down, raw and political.

My pedagogy is improvised. I feel my way as a teacher, and for that reason I have no how-to manual of poetry teaching. But I do recognize something permanent and mobile at the core of everything I do in relation to poetry, something worth coaxing out into

the corner of the eye to suggest why the writing, reading, editing, and teaching of poetry might become a life-long passion. I think a vision of poetry---whether mine or some other—might serve as the current which snaps into a force-field all the often excruciating minutiae of analysis we ask students to learn. If the force field analogy will hold, it ought to be possible sometimes to link the minutiae with the force.

Let the amphibrach (my own favourite metrical foot) stand for the apparatus of prosody. One learns the amphibrach, what it sounds like, how to track its appearances, its nuancing of meaning, as a tiny part of the whole discipline of sensitivity to all branches of the English language. Learns it why? To court the unspeakable core of what-is. The amphibrach and all its prosodic relatives are members of a system that many poets now think obsolete, their poetry having moved on into freer measures, free verse. We learn the amphibrach and all the rest to read the poetry that was written when fixed forms reigned, yes, but also because obsolescence in literary matters is often illusory, *and* because the heart of poetry is so elusive that approaching it in words of our own calls out every expertise we can muster.

I want my students to feel at some point what I think I know: poetry may never reside *in* words, true, but words are what we have and their effective use requires training in fundamentals. Language is a body you can never be intimate enough with; it composes *us*. "language [is] a living body we enter at birth," says Daphne Marlatt. "[it] sustains and contains us. it does not stand in place of anything else, it does not replace the bodies around us. placental, our flat land, our sea, it is both place (where we are situated) and body (that contains us), that body of language we speak, our mothertongue." There is nothing airy about the discipline of poetry, nothing simple about tough slogging through exercises like scansion that acquaint us with its behaviour. Anything that invests with passion our meeting with that body has much to recommend it.

Students who write poetry are in a position to respect and understand poetry as others write it. They can be induced to recognize their own connection with Shakespeare and Milton. Trying and failing to write a decent sonnet shows that the form is still viable even if temporarily out of range, and a qualified success makes the lesson stick harder. But I'm less interested in the primary lesson—you can't keep a good form down—than I am in a by-product of that learning: no one who has worked at writing a sonnet ever reads a sonnet casually again.

But it might be too much to expect my student in London, Ontario to leap across time and space into affinity between herself and Shakespeare. No way (I can hear my student say), no way *I'm* going to be buried in a corner of Westminster Abbey. Better start closer to home. In London, Ontario I could connect my student with any one of half a dozen "world class" poets. I might show her Michael Ondaatje's *Rat Jelly* first; many of the poems in this volume were written in and about my city. One of the poems even disparages the English department I teach in and so feeds my Canadian need for self-deprecation. And of course Ondaatje is now internationally admired and so no longer a mere Canadian writer. The point is to grab the student with *some* poetry and then use that engagement to draw her in different directions.

Whether with traditional or local models, then, there are various ways to begin. I find that students often like to try the difficult forms, sonnet, villanelle, sestina. Acrostics are popular, as are foreign forms—ghazal, renga, haibun, glosa—introduced into Canadian writing by excellent poets and thus turned into interesting domestic models. But the slyest start might be made with whatever the student happens to be writing. Reading instruction may then be masked by editorial suggestions. Most students of my experience write free verse, and most of that verse lies somewhere between the exceedingly free and the utterly lawless. Few sonnets are born out of such beginnings. But there is huge pedagogic value in paying serious attention to a chaotic draft if it contains the merest spark of verbal excitement. A number of simple questions may be asked of any verbal performance purporting or hoping to be a poem:

What is its true voice? (If the poem upholds the standard principles of the English language, fine, and Prince Charles will be happy, but those of us distant from the English centre insist on speaking improper when we wanna.) Does it use more words than it needs to? Do the words that have been chosen line up with their dictionary meanings? Would the substitution of other words create more connotative charge without subverting the primary sense? Could an abstraction be replaced with an image? Are the vowels and consonants singing each to each, or are they haphazard? Are the rhythms smooth or rough, and do they support or thwart the verbal meanings? (A use of scansion to demonstrate the rough and the smooth might create an appetite for learning that discipline of analysis.) Are the syntactic units whole or fragmentary? If fragments, do they work as such or might they be more effective joined

together? Vice versa? Are there, or might there be, any rhetorical arrangements at work? (Casual name-dropping—chiasmus, anaphora, antithesis—might arouse curiosity about rhetoric.) Are punctuation marks present or absent, conventionally or expressively used? Are the line breaks random, or are they active compositional elements? Is the right hand margin controlling? If so, need it be? Are opportunities seized or lost to punctuate with vertical spaces? A checklist might be made of these and other inquiries, but each poem raises its own questions and no checklist takes the place of a reader's educated intuition and common sense.

Late in the questioning it might be pointed out how little attention has been given that superficial sort of meaning, what the poem was intended to say. Most young writers begin with self-expression, and why not? But meaning happens everywhere in the body of a live poem; when more signifying systems crackle, meaning is more surely on the move. Robert Bringhurst:

> To be is to speak with the bristlecone
> pines and the whitebarks,
> glaciers and rivers, grasses and schists,
> and if it is permitted, once also
> with pelicans. Being
> is what there is room for in that
> conversation. The loved is what stays
> in the mind; that is, it has meaning,
> and meaning keeps going. This
> is the definition of meaning.

No need to begin teaching poetry with rules, then; you can start with a student's poem. The process of nudging it into being more than it was raises the compositional ante. One simple and astonishing notion having been communicated (a poem might be revised), the poet sees how to expect more of herself. And she also sees and hears differently the poem, say "Ode to the West Wind," that she studied in Poetry and Prosody class last week. Those complicated stanzaic and prosodic observances: amazing that they don't ground the thematic flight to freedom. How on earth did Shelley do that?

Nobody whose poem is thoroughly interrogated (that is, edited) should miss seeing how complex and demanding and exciting the writing (and the reading) of poetry is, whether it's formal or free. There are always rules. The open-form poem generates its own internal rule, and observing that discipline ought to induce re-

spect for traditional rules and conventions, as tools of analysis if not of composition. I don't teach anyone how to write. Talent is inborn and developed by hard work. But I've found that I can help attentive people become more penetrating readers, both harder to please and friendlier to poetry, by drawing them in to the often collaborative process of making.

Whatever the beginning, whether from tradition (like the bee in search of pollen) or from self (like the spider spinning out of its own entrails), the hope is to help the writer feel his or her way beyond the mechanical assembly of poetic vehicles. Poetry will not ride in such craft. No, the hope is to be present when the craft creates a lift—into a region where the writer was not expecting to go and where in fact you follow her only on wings of imagination. Language itself having taken the lead. One experience of being drawn into a linguistic dynamic beyond yourself, just one, can change a life.

The clearest case of breakthrough into real writing that I ever saw was in a course called "Advanced Fiction." One of my students, unbeknownst to himself, was in thrall to genre. He naturally wanted to write the sorts of prose he enjoyed reading. He wrote me part of a road novel (Jack Kerouac is a very popular muse), the opening of a science fiction novel, a chapter of gothic mystery. Each of these fragments was promising in a self-limiting way; each would have taken the whole year to complete. In my non-intrusive way, I would have happily stayed with him on any of these projects, but retrospectively it became clear that the genre-hopping was a quest. Finally he wrote a short clean affecting prose piece that fit no category. Prose poem, maybe. It came out of his guts and it astonished him. "Look at this," I could say; "now look at what you've done up to this point. Which is real?" A teacher loves such moments. Now he could return to the genres, if he wished, with some sense of how to make them live.

Such successes have happened in small classes, in which the editing approach may be suited to the individual, though the very best writer-editor ratio is one-to-one. My feeling of success, meaning usefulness, diminishes in direct proportion to increase in class size. Those of you who teach large classes may have to adapt or even discard my editing suggestions. Perhaps this is the right moment to say that I have reservations about presenting what sometimes works for me as a model for others even in my own English Department, let alone for people in other countries where quite other conditions may obtain. I have pedagogical reservations, period. In

my more confident moments I call this humility. Humility tells me that teachers of poetry require the Muse's assistance at double rate and that anyone presuming to discourse on pedagogy should seek four times the help.

I might be more confident of having sound pedagogical advice to share if I hadn't learned that not all of my colleagues feel comfortable with poetry. Some of them never read poetry for pleasure. For them, teaching poetry is a job uninspired by love and no window opening on the plenitude of what-is. Other colleagues love poetry but still feel unqualified to read and comment on student work. To these people I would like to say that only very elementary expertise is required, though the more intense its application the better.

I have discovered that I can be most useful to a writer by placing very basic sensitivities at his or her disposal, my eyes and ears especially. I mean something more than the physical organs, but not *very* much more. Practice has taught me something so simple that its importance is easy to miss: to *trust* my instinctual reactions to a poem. Encountering a new poem of any difficulty, I have also learned to relax, realizing that uncertainty is not only natural but necessary. Poets follow their instincts, by trial and error, through draft after draft, coming closer and closer to a text that more or less matches the inchoate originating impulse. There is no perfect ensemble of words hovering in the ether, waiting to be discovered, one by one, as the poem falls into place on the page. That is why an editor might fruitfully enter the process. Most poets value response from anyone willing to take the trouble to read a poem carefully—three times, at a minimum. Even lacking an editor's checklist, nobody whose daily work involves words is incapable of pointing out where a rhythm lurches badly. Be careful, though. The life of the poem might be in the lurch. Nobody who knows what a sentence is is incapable of diagnosing an offence against syntax. Careful: correct syntax is not a law of poetry. No one who cares for poetry will be unable to identify—at least to sense—something vital in wildly unconventional work. Readers willing to relax their sense-making capacities sometimes find themselves tight with subcutaneous sense. Beauty is not skin deep. To go deeper is to take one's leave of known quantities, to make oneself vulnerable. It isn't always easy to embrace a chaos out of which something wants to be born.

According to Stephen Leacock, the meaning of a Ph.D. is "that the recipient of instruction is examined for the last time in his life,

and is pronounced completely full. After this, no new ideas can be imparted to him." But perhaps he might *unlearn* a little. My quarter century of self-taught writing and editing, my return to basics, post-dates my academic training. Having come by this parallel education or diseducation, I hope to help make my students' exposure to poetry more integral than mine was. I would like them to feel the institution dissolve around them at times. e.e. cummings' clergyman father, according to his son, once "horribly shocked his pewholders by crying 'the Kingdom of Heaven is no spiritual roof-garden: it's inside you.'" He meant that no building would contain it. If poetry dwells remote from poems, should we expect a school to house knowledge?

If I strive to make the forms disappear, it is not to maintain their transparency. I also want at times to call particular attention to their existence. Schools and the disciplines they divide are not neutral systems. The structures channel and limit discovery unless interrogated themselves. Is it subversive to point this out? Of forms, yes, but not of essences. "Whatever else," says Irving Layton, "poetry is freedom." "Poetry is not innocent, not sweet, not just sweet," says A.R. Ammons, "It charms to convince, deceive, make room, find a way to autonomy and freedom. We owe to those who deal at the center of these dynamics the vitality of our lives."

I have not been pushing my own pedagogy. I don't proselytize for a single poetics either. In my country many poets take sides over the question of whether so-called closed or so-called open forms should prevail. Perhaps the postmodernists, the process people, are ascendant at the moment, though a strong community of Canadian formalists keeps them honest. My own tentative, exploratory compositional procedure—writing in the dark, writing lost—probably puts me on the "open" side as a writer, but I see nothing to hold me there as reader and editor, as teacher. What could be less satisfying than producing satellites of yourself? I have a watchword from Leonard Cohen's novel *Beautiful Losers*: "To discover the truth in anything that is alien, first dispense with the indispensable in your own system." No reader is innocent of preconceptions and preferences; de-selving takes effort. But ego-tripping creative writing teachers can be dangerous.

In the 1970s Basil Bunting offered a creative writing course at the University of Victoria on the west coast of Canada. An American poet, August Kleinzahler, one of Bunting's students, recalled with approval many years later on the occasion of Bunting's 80th birthday that the poet didn't *teach* anything. He read. Day after

day he read aloud from writing he liked. The students who expected some variant of the teaching they were used to dropped the course. Those who remained got a peculiar and delightful education which did *not* feature sensitive editing of their own work. "A student would prepare a poem," Kleinzahler remembers, "mimeograph it, distribute it to classmates and teacher, then read it aloud. Never snide, never demeaning, Mr. Bunting managed, however, to convey horror and fatigue commingled." Why is it that I often think of this non- or anti-pedagogy, so completely different from my own, with delight? Well, I have a sense of humour. And I know what a fine poet August Kleinzahler became. And I see that, since Bunting *was* the passionate core of his subject, teaching was beside the point. Leaving you with him, I mean to say that there's more than one way to skin a cat.

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