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the gold standard

Defending Creative Writing in the Classroom

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Let me start small. You are in a high school classroom. It is industry standard: cinderblock walls painted a cheery color, posters adorned with writers like Shakespeare and Frederick Douglass, a teacher looking at five rows of students who either look back or look out the windows toward the freedom of a parking lot full of cars and an endless blue sky. Now, let's look closer. First of all, that teacher wants to teach. Sure, there are teachers out there who have burned out, but for the most part, if you're in education, you're still cupping your hand around the flame to keep it alive. Second, the students want to learn. Although they may not admit it or even know it right now, the classes they'll remember fondly are the ones in which they actually learned something. Third, that elephant you see squatting in the corner—the College Admissions Officer—well, the elephant wants to enroll the best students possible. These intentions are, for the most part, pure. In the larger world, however, teachers have different syllabi, standards, and expectations. Students read, write, talk and think in as many different ways as there are students. Being human, they also occasionally cheat and lie. What's a poor Admissions Officer to do? Well, conveniently, we teachers have a surefire way of reducing each student's myriad variables to a single, totalizing sign. It's called grading. We assign a number (or a letter) to each student's performance, a number that goes up or down in response to various stimuli. Since we've entered the digital age, think of it like computer code: the student is converted into numbers. The numbers travel to the Admissions Office, which does its level best to produce a holistic picture of the student from the numbers.

Of course, I'm reducing the educational event to an equation. My point isn't to reveal that grades are imperfect, it's to argue that the concept of grades is fundamentally flawed. If grades were meant to introduce standards and accountability into the pursuit of knowledge, in effect they have actually deprived us of any real conception of quality. A student's work becomes purely rhetorical, an effort to persuade a teacher to assign a particular grade. Through some trickiness of signifier and signified that post-structuralists would enjoy thoroughly, the A becomes the goal in and of itself, not as an agreed-upon sign for quality. Given an A for work they knew to be less than their best, few students would demand a lower grade. The goal becomes to do just enough to garner the A; anything more is wasted effort for unnecessary quality. This is the same mentality that leads to drug use in sports. (Plagiarism is the steroid of the academic world.) If an Olympic medal is the goal, then the logical athlete would use any method possible to achieve that goal. If an effort worthy of a medal is the goal, then rules against drug use have currency beyond how well they can be enforced. The game then embodies the moral integrity and the drive for excellence that we like to think of the medal as symbolizing.

Grades are like the dollar: they have currency because we believe they do. The dollar used to be backed up with gold—*the gold standard*, still a phrase used to refer to excellence in achievement. Now, of course, the dollar is backed up by—the dollar. It's backed up solely by our faith that it's still worth something. In the same way, grades have become disassociated from quality. Also like the dollar, grades are inflationary; an A just isn't worth as much today as it was twenty years ago. And like banks and financiers, we're all so invested in the system that it's nearly impossible to change it; at the very least, we would have to be faced with a genuine crisis to have enough momentum to effect change.

The consequences of this system of grades become clear whenever teachers try to step outside it. Take, for example, a writing teacher who assigns a paper with no prompt, no defined subject matter or style, no rubric for evaluation. "Follow your interest," the teacher might say. "If you're genuinely interested in what you can learn about your subject by writing about it, then I'll probably be interested in reading what you've written." At first glance this may seem irresponsible, an abdication of the teacher's role as an instructor, but a look at student responses is rather illuminating. A few are exhilarated to be free of what always felt like cumbersome and artificial restraints on their learning (because they've always thought of education as being their own), but many respond with pain, panic, and not a little anger. It's so much easier to perform the well-trodden steps of the dance. What does the teacher want to hear? Figure that out and you've got it made. Go get that A! Rubrics reduce writing to a checklist of skills and accomplishments; writing thus becomes exercise rather than exploration. Of course, we must give students the tools they need to write better papers down the line, but if expository writing is the only form of writing they do, many students make the understandable assumption that this is what writing is. And that is a problem.

When writing is reduced to just an exercise, then no one wants to read what is being written. Not the student, not the teacher, not the Admissions Officer, and certainly no one from outside the rhetorical situation of the grade. Even the most well-meaning parents frequently settle for reading the report card, trusting the numbers there to offer up a fair approximation of their child's progress. In other words, the writing exists only to be graded. The concept that writing means something, that it exists to further our human need to expand our understanding, is as alien as the concept that students might be capable of producing writing that accomplishes this feat. Many students today don't really understand that writing can be judged on its own merits, that it can be good and bad, more and less interesting. They only know that it can be graded, and since grades don't necessarily indicate quality, since grades have become the goal rather than a sign of achievement, since grades have been inflated to the point of near-meaninglessness, then the writing also becomes essentially meaningless.

Let's look at it this way: how wide is the gap between what is read and what is written in high school? *Heart of Darkness* and a student paper about *Heart of Darkness* are both documents written in the English language, but otherwise they're radically different. I'd propose that this difference boils down to two things: purpose and quality. And the essential distinction between Joey in the front row and Joseph Conrad is one of purpose rather than quality. Is Conrad's writing of a higher quality than Joey's? It sure is. But this gap can be narrowed. Perhaps Joey has the potential to be the Conrad of his generation, but Joey will never reach his potential so long as he writes for the sole purpose of getting a grade.

So here is what we've produced: a classroom where students read literature that might as well have been writ in stone and cast down from heaven in a box marked *For High School Reading Lists.* Students don't realize that the activity they engage in—writing for class—bears a relation to the activity "real" writers engage in—writing for publication. Of course, I am overstating the case here; lest I sound like a reactionary pundit whaling away on the "State of American education," let me say that the problem here is not the fault of students, teachers, colleges, legislators, parents, or Joseph Conrad. As in the imaginary classroom I proposed at the beginning of this essay, the intentions everyone brings to education are generally pure and good. But the system of grades has unintended consequences, one of which is the insulation of students from a qualitative understanding of their own writing.

What to do? I'm certainly not advocating anarchy or banishing grades forever from the classroom. Grades serve a purpose; they allow a massive and massively varied education system to operate efficiently, they help colleges to evaluate candidates for admission, and they do indicate the level of a student's achievement to a certain degree. Perhaps there is a better system out there, but I don't pretend to know what it might be. However, I do believe that there is a way to make the current system better, and ironically, it resides in the difficult-to-grade border region between self-expression and anything goes—creative writing.

Why creative writing? You'll find it on most high school English curricula, tucked in right after analytical writing. So what is it and why is it on that curriculum? Here are some of the reasons I've heard: it gives "non-analytical" minds a chance to excel, it offers students a break from more "serious" assignments, it teaches "creativity," and finally, it's fun.

For an interesting parallel, let's turn to modern painting. A common (and pat) response to Jackson Pollock's drip paintings is "But I could do that." This statement contains a great unintentional truth: "Yes, you could." We are all capable of making art—some are more capable than others, but we are all capable. Art is not handed down from heaven in big boxes labeled Metropolitan Museum of Art or MOMA. It is made by human beings just like you and me. Even Shakespeare faced the white page, just like we all do, every day. The quality of the choices he made may be far beyond the quality of our own, but the activity in its essence is the same. When people respond to art with "But I could do that" instead of "Maybe I could do that," they turn it into a display of technical virtuosity, as if Michelangelo were Michelangelo just because he was pretty handy with a chisel. It's an attempt to find an objective standard for art, to nail it down once and for all, to give it a grade. Michelangelo, you get an A for David. Very lifelike indeed.

The definition of art that emerges is essentially this: something I can't do. And this may be true. Not everyone can be Michelangelo, just like Joey probably won't grow up to eclipse Joseph Conrad. By the same token, somebody has to become the next great artist, the next great writer. By separating ourselves from the activity of art, by making ourselves into simple consumers, we turn the artist into a magician, performing a trick for an audience (us) waiting to be tricked. But a piece of writing does everything out in the open—no sleeved aces or false bottom chests, just syntax, vocabulary, character and plot, the mechanics of the work laid bare for the reader to engage. To say "But I could do that" reveals that we want to be dazzled, to be tricked, that we are disappointed if the work seems to be the work of hands like ours.

Why should we care? What is the problem with being dazzled by art? Well, one big problem for teachers of English is that the essential philosophical basis of the contemporary English curriculum is the following maxim: Students learn to write by reading great literature. But if the students fail to make any real connection between the words they read and the words they write—if they are dazzled instead of discerning—is the study of literature really serving its purpose? Unless by some process of osmosis the texts are seeping into the students' unconscious brains (and I'm sure there is some truth to this idea) then we are making a critical and basic error in the way we teach.

As a young teacher, I assumed that literature was virtuous, and that students were made into better writers, readers, thinkers, and human beings by reading great writing. But our students are overwhelmed with information, and so they've learned to dip into reading the way a skipping rock dips into water. They are filtering machines, isolating and foregrounding important elements from the background noise. This is an essential skill for living in the United States, but a death knell for real writing and reading. The great truth of language is that it is contextual; we don't read words so much as we read the relationships between words. Great writers are masters of placement, not vocabulary. I'm shocked, for example, to hear students complain of difficulty and confusion when reading *The Great Gatsby*, a book that I treasure for the grace, clarity and simplicity of its prose. The difficulty they have is that Fitzgerald's sentences flow and move. They begin at the water's edge and run like the grass through Tom Buchanan's backyard all the way to the house. If you aren't reading contextually (or if you're trying to skim), then the often-complicated descriptions, emotions, concepts and impulses that the clean, simple sentences convey will make the sentences themselves appear unnervingly complicated.

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Creative writing teaches contextual thinking. Grammar, syntax, vocabulary, reading, writing, finding a "voice," communicating to a reader: all fall under the purview of creative work. Finding a way to use creative writing to knit these activities together is the great task of the writing teacher. Going back to our example above, I'm not trying to teach Joey to write *Heart of Darkness* or *The Great Gatsby*. But I am trying to teach him that they are written documents; that they are the product of human decisions made on the basis of criteria that he can understand. They have lessons to teach. Not moral ones (although they may have those as well) but stylistic ones. Lessons about writing.

Creative writing gives reading and writing new purpose. If a student is offered the chance through creative writing—poems, memoir, fiction, essays, anything with its source in the student—to express something that matters to him or her, then an opportunity exists to teach that student a critical lesson: the way they write correlates directly to how well the reader "gets" what they are trying to say. Suddenly, the entire enterprise has its source in the student. Syntax, phrasing, grammar, vocabulary, voice, style: they all suddenly have value. The writing begins to matter.

A danger, of course, is that given the opportunity and encouragement to write creatively, students often say things that teachers would rather not hear. Things we'd prefer didn't exist—abuse, drugs, alcohol, eating disorders, depression—often emerge in creative work. If you are asking students to write openly, you have to be prepared for the fact that they just might do it.

The advice I'm about to offer may sound a bit heartless, but I think it's really important: When a student does bring up issues like this, direct the conversation back to the writing. It is so tempting to step away, to talk about the issue rather than the writing. (And in many cases, this is also necessary. If a student writes about domestic abuse, you need to be clear about what duty you have to confirm and report the situation.) If the student is writing about something that is important to them, they will understand that the way they write about that something is also important. If you abandon the focus on writing the minute a dramatic subject comes up, then you confirm what most students suspect: that writing doesn't matter, only topics matter. And this is the farthest thing from the truth. Painful topics appear every day on *The Jerry Springer Show*, but the emotion is debased by the manner, context and motivation with which they are presented. Writing is all about using the writer's manifold skills to elevate

human emotions to the level of art and to give art the driving force of human emotion. It's all about the writing. When we don't teach our students this, we do them a great disservice.

Of course, this is not going to work for all students. No matter how hard I try, some refuse to unbuckle even one plate of their armor. They will go to the wall before they admit that something is important to them. Some are so skilled at deducing and reproducing what a teacher wants that they can simulate excitement and interest. Some have struggled so mightily with language that they gave up years before and nothing I do can convince them that words can do anything but frustrate. But this is true of every lesson, every class. Students are stubbornly individual, which means that they all have something different and interesting to say, but also means that some of them will refuse to say it. So we do the best we can, reach as many students as we can.

I devoted the first half of this essay to the question of grades for a simple reason: they are the motivation for most of my students. They are both the carrot and the stick. In the absence of a working definition of success that reflects students as readers, writers and human beings, grades stand for success. So how can we reconcile creative writing with the system of grades that defines the American educational experience? Unfortunately, the answer is simple: we can't.

Grading creative writing will forever be imperfect because the concept of grading just doesn't apply. I've already shown the similarities between grades and the dollar, between the economy of grades and the economy of money. Well, art will always fail to justify itself in a strictly capitalist sense. Art is not "necessary," it does not offer "marketable skills." Grading creative writing is like putting a price tag on art: We do it, but always with the awareness that there's something incongruent happening, something a bit absurd. As teachers, we either accept that the system only imperfectly applies to creative work and grade it anyway, or we don't apply grades and trust that the students will find motivation elsewhere.

The fact that grades don't really apply to creative writing does not in any way mean that we shouldn't teach it. In fact, it is precisely why we should. Art is often seen as standard-less, the ultimate expression of moral relativism, but in fact, art is the only thing in our culture that defies and reveals rhetoric and its power to conceal, its willingness to sacrifice meaning and integrity on the altar of persuasiveness. Some things exist beyond the power of persuasion. Even the hard sciences, seen as the province of theory and proof, the scientific method, have been subverted by the relativist nature of rhetoric. Evolution and global warming aren't debated on their scientific pedigree so much as on their adherence to particular political points of view. Art offers a forum for genuine discourse, sincere discourse. How can students become real participants in a democracy when they don't understand the difference between rhetoric—the lingua franca of politics—and literature, which tries to be honest about human emotions and dilemmas.

Perhaps the only way to really define art is negatively, against the purely rhetorical background of politics, advertising, markets, grades, salaries, and "success." When artists stray into these realms, they often become rhetoricians. (Some conceptual artists seem more concerned with writing a manifesto than with creating a piece of work.) I'm sure we all can think of novels, stories and poems that seem more occupied with promoting a particular point of view than they do with their own aesthetic priorities. Art creates its own world, with its own moral imperatives that shed light on our own. A politician becomes an artist when articulating a human truth that exists beyond pragmatism and self-interest—King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" comes to mind. In other words, literature can be defined as writing in which nothing is at stake other than aesthetic and moral principles, which is another way of saying that everything is at stake. Literature sidesteps the system of grades and economics.

Sinclair Lewis's great novel *Babbitt* tells the story of the American Man in the Modern Age: craven, obsessed with social status and codes, buoyant when the world confirms his expectations and confused when it does not. The book's climax is a domestic one: Babbitt's son has eloped with the girl next door. The living room is a turbulent scene; everyone swirling in the shock of the transgression that's just taken place, but for the first time in the novel, Babbitt steps far enough outside social convention to realize that his son is in love, that perhaps the accepted custom doesn't apply in this case. He stands behind his son, who cries, "Gosh, dad, are you really going to be human?" In the end, this is what literature does; it reminds us of what it means to be a human being.