

The Writers' Workshop

AS FAR AS I know, the term "writers' workshop" first came into use some sixty years ago when Iowa University, with the blessing of the Board of Regents, decided to accept "creative" theses in partial fulfillment of the requirements toward earning certain advanced degrees. Quite a radical idea at the time. Write a string quartet toward a Ph.D. in music. Paint paintings for a master's in fine arts. Mount a ballet for dance, or write a play for theater. Despite the initial scandalization of the academy, the idea spread rapidly and is now commonplace. The words "writers' workshop," describing what all those prose writers or poets were doing in all those university classrooms, may have been chosen more for their reassuring overtones of craft guilds, handmade artifacts and so on, than for any descriptive precision.

Writers' workshops around the country reflect wildly different assumptions about what the work should be, what the goals are and how progress might be measured. Some are simply therapy sessions, attempting to create a warm, nurturing environment in which writers are encouraged to express themselves, release their putative creative energies without fear and see what happens. Some have a political agenda—feminist art, black art, social protest art. Some have an aesthetic agenda—minimalism, realism, metafiction. There are writers' workshops specializing in horror fiction, detective fiction, children's fiction

and science fiction. There are workshops that have almost nothing to do with writing, where the texts are little more than an excuse for primal-scream catharsis on the one hand, new-age channeling on the other. So it follows that in talking about a writers' workshop, it must be made clear just whose workshop is under discussion. I will attempt to describe my own at the University of Iowa.

Every Tuesday at 4:30 in the afternoon I meet with about a dozen students. We have all picked up copies of the material we're going to talk about—texts written by the two students who are "up" that week—and have read them several times over the weekend, made editorial comments in the margins and written letters to the authors attempting to describe our reactions to the texts. These letters are quite important, first because they are written before any public discussion and hence are not corrupted by what may be said in class, and second because they tend to be more supportive, more personal and sometimes more trenchant than what the writer of the letter might say in class. Thus if a story is torn apart during workshop, the letters, which are read one week later (since I keep them and read them myself during that time), can work to cheer a student up and encourage more work.

We talk for two and a half hours. The author of the text being examined usually remains silent, which some observers find surprising, but which I encourage. If there is a tension between the writer's intentions for the text and what the text, standing alone, appears actually to be doing to the readers, that is a tension the writer should face, and think about. As well, the writer's temptation to defend his or her work can lead to wasted time.

But let me back up now to the first meeting, when we have no texts before us and I try to give a general sense of what I think our work should be. I announce right away that I reserve

the right to be wrong, because not to do so would severely restrict my ability to talk at all. Narrative fiction is complex, judgments can be subjective, tastes differ and rules seldom hold.

I further state that the focus of our attention will be the texts, and our goal will be to expand our awareness of how language functions on the page. We will stop with the text, and resist the temptation to go through it and talk about the author. Remarks, thoughts and reactions to a given piece of writing should be addressed to the room as a whole and not to the author, whose presence, for the rest of us, is superfluous. We are studying the text, what the text really is rather than what the author might have wanted it to be or thought that it was.

The people in my workshop are usually in their late twenties, very bright, exceptionally well read by modern standards, ambitious and in thrall to books and literature. As sophisticated as they are about other people's writing, they are often quite naive about their own, half assuming, for instance, that when they write, their souls are on their pages and that an attack on the page is an attack on the soul. I try to make the point that when the soul is truly on the page, the work has risen past the level at which it makes much sense for us to talk about it. Victory has been achieved, and the work passes over to the attention of students of literature, culture and aesthetics. We, on the other hand (and I include myself), have more immediate goals. We're trying to write better prose and to struggle through whatever we have to struggle through in order to do it. In a not entirely ancillary way, we want to get published, as a confirmation of the value of the work and a partial authentication of the worker in the chosen role of writer. These latter passions are tacitly understood as part of the general background of the workshop, but it soon becomes clear that in only the most minimal sense are they a function of the quality of the work. Better to separate,

even if somewhat artificially, the text from the author, and keep our attention on the language.

Chalk in hand, I go to the blackboard and suggest that it might be helpful to think about the relationship between the writer and the reader. A common error is to use the following model of a transportation exchange.

Writer —————> Text <----- Reader

The writer creates a story and puts it into a code (language) that is the text. The reader decodes the text and receives the story. Simple transportation from the writer/creator to the reader/witness.

But what really goes on is more complicated. The language statement "yellow pencil" can carry no actual color. The reader must add the color with the mind's eye for the full image to emerge. Likewise, the reader's energy is needed to hear tones of voice in dialogue, to infer information that the text only implies, to make full pictures from the text's suggestive sketches of the physical world, to respond to metaphor, and on up to higher and higher levels. The reader is not a passive witness to, for instance, Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants." He or she is pouring energy into the text, which, as a result of severe discipline, has been designed to elicit, welcome and use that energy. Indeed, without work from the reader the story doesn't make much sense. (What are they going on about? Where is the train taking her, and what is she going to do there?) So the above model is wiped from the board and another put in its place.



This model purports energy from the writer (the act of writing) aimed at the reader, and energy from the reader (the act of reading) aimed at the text. The text is thought of not as a single plane or page in space, but as the zone where the two arcs of energy overlap.



This model suggests that the reader is to some extent the cocreator of the narrative. The author, then, must write in such a way as to allow the reader's energy into the work. If the text is unintelligible, it falls short of the zone and the reader is blocked. If the text is preemptive and bullying, it goes past the zone, smothers the incoming energy, and the reader is blocked. In either case the dance of two minds necessary to bring a living narrative into existence is precluded. Note that no judgment is made about how to handle the reader's energy once it has been allowed in. Great demands can be made of the reader, or lesser ones, depending on what's afoot. The point is, without the active participation of the reader's mind and imagination, nothing will happen. In addition, the model says nothing about the degree or intensity of the energy from the two sides in relation to each other. Obviously it takes *much* more energy (and time) to write good prose than it does to read it.

All right, the students say, assuming we buy the idea of the zone for the moment, what can you tell us about getting into it, or writing toward it? I respond that that is what we will be doing all semester, and that in preparation I will put forward some unproven but possibly useful ideas.

Most writers began writing as an extension of their love of reading. They were excited by books even as children, perceiv-

ing a kind of magic going on in narrative which they were eventually drawn to emulate. As they grew older they plunged into literature and became used to reading over their heads. They *eagerly* read over their heads. When, as adults, they try to write, they are often as much preoccupied with magic—effect, simile, metaphors, mood—the fancy stuff—as with meaning. They are intoxicated with the seemingly endless power of language, an intoxication that can be dangerous. For while it is true that reading over one's head is good, writing over one's head is very bad indeed. An almost certain guarantee of failure, in fact.

When we write we are not alone, starting everything from scratch, however much it might feel that way. Literature is a continuum—moving and changing, to be sure—but much has already been done for us. Conventions have been established. When we make paragraphs, use punctuation, follow (flexibly) the rules of grammar and so forth, we are borne by the flow of that continuum. We can employ an omniscient third-person narrator without having to explain who is narrating, because Flaubert and others cleared that particular problem away. A tremendous amount has been done for us. Literature is a river, full of currents and crosscurrents, and when we write, we are in it, like it or not. If we grow too forgetful, we can drown.

At the blackboard again, I draw the following box.

| Meaning | Sense | Clarity |
|---------|-------|---------|
|---------|-------|---------|

This is the first order of business in trying to write toward the zone, the first signal to the reader that his or her energy is welcome, the first announcement of a common ground.

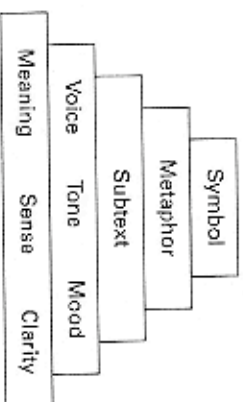
1. **Meaning.** At the literal level, the writer's words must mean what they say. The author, having chosen them, must stand fully and firmly behind them. *Obese, fat, chubby, heavy*

and *stout*, for instance, have different meanings. They are not interchangeable. *He sat down with a sigh* means that the sitting and sighing are happening at the same time, which precludes a construction such as "*I'm too tired to think*," *he said as he sat down with a sigh*. The reader will undoubtedly get the drift and will separate the sighing from the saying, but the writing is sloppy from the point of view of meaning. It doesn't, at the literal level, mean what it says. Errors of meaning are quite common in lax prose, and there are more ways of making them than I can list here.

2. Sense. The text must make sense, lest the reader be excluded. *The boy ate the watermelon* makes sense. *The watermelon ate the boy* does not, unless the author has created a special world in which it does. Unmotivated behavior in characters doesn't make sense to the reader, who is also confused by randomness, arbitrariness or aimlessness in the text. The writer must recognize the continuous unrelenting pressure from the reader that the text make sense. It can be strange sense, to be sure, but the reader has to be able to understand the text to enter it.

3. Clarity. Strunk and White tell us not to use ten words where five will do. This is because the most compact language statement is almost always clearer than an expansive one. The goal is not brevity for its own sake but *clarity*. The reader expects the writer to have removed all excess language, to have distilled things to their essences, whether the style is simple or complex. If the writer has not done this work, the reader is less enthusiastic about putting energy into the text, less sure about being on common ground. As well, clarity has aesthetic value all by itself. To read Orwell is to get real pleasure from the clarity of the prose, and this is true whether or not one agrees with the politics that are so often embedded in his work.

The struggle to maintain meaning, sense and clarity is the primary activity of any writer. It turns out to be quite hard to do, demanding constant concentration at high levels, constant self-editing and a continuous preconscious awareness of the ghostly presence of a mind on the other side of the zone. Many enthusiastic inexperienced writers (even some experienced ones) would like to skip this struggle, or evade it while maintaining that of course it has some importance but the real action occurs at higher levels, up where the fancy stuff is, the stuff that so moves them as readers. I maintain that any attempt to write from the top down will likely fail. I put forward the idea of a sort of pyramid



in which the higher levels have a chance to become operative only as the levels below become operative. The most common error ones sees in talented young writers is the attempt to work from the top down rather than the bottom up. A good workshop can save people a tremendous amount of time if it can correct this error. The pyramid is reductive, no more than a thought experiment, really, but it strengthens writers. A great deal of what makes good writing is mysterious and beyond our power to control directly, but we need not be entirely helpless in our attempts to approach the state in which we might possibly increase our chances of doing good writing. You cannot really teach a baseball player how to become a great hitter, says Kurt

Vonnegut, with regard to teaching writing, but you can teach him where to stand in the box, how to shift his weight during the swing, how to follow through and a dozen other things he'll need to know before he can become even a good hitter.

Against this background, then, we begin to look at student texts. Everyone is warned that my remarks are likely to be negative, that experience has shown me that my positive remarks aren't likely to have the same impact, which is too bad, but seems to be the case. I will search out every weakness in the prose that I can, explaining as carefully as I can precisely why I consider each discovered weakness to be an actual weakness, rather than some idiosyncratic response to the text of my own. I will tear the prose apart until I get prose sufficiently strong that it does not tear. This approach creates a good deal of nervousness in the students at first, but as the semester progresses the problem eases. They begin to see the texts are being looked at, not the authors, and that the process is oddly impersonal (especially if it's someone else's work under discussion) and generally rational. We put to the test my assertion that if there is some large, abstract problem with a story, or a series of problems—"It's thin." "It lacks energy." "It lacks narrative drive." "It's frustrating to read." Etc., etc.—the seeds of the problem can *always* be found at the microlevel of language, the words and sentences on the page. That is at least a place for the author to start actual work to strengthen the story rather than simply throwing up one's hands in despair. Another draft, and then again another draft, until one has gone as far as one senses one can reasonably go.

Much of this work has to do with meaning, sense, clarity and working from the bottom up vis-à-vis the pyramid. We spend time and effort trying to find out what's wrong, leaving it to the author to fix it. (Again, some observers find this surprising. My

own feeling is that, in prose, any given problem is likely to be susceptible to many different solutions, and that the author's solution is the one that counts. And writing even a simple sentence should be done slowly and carefully within the context of the whole narrative, and never off the top of one's head in a classroom.) I often use the class as a sort of panel to verify the existence of a problem. "How many of you thought they were still in the kitchen, when it turns out they were in the living room?" (We don't vote—it's a question of nodding heads.) If there is a consensus, we go to the language to find out why we thought they were still in the kitchen. If this sounds trivial, we should remember Virginia Woolf's comment after being asked how her three hours of writing had gone one afternoon. (I paraphrase.) "Very well. I got them through the French doors and out onto the patio." She was quite serious.

As we read closely and compare our readings, many kinds of problems can be seen to crop up in the texts. We learn the danger of giving the reader insufficient information—how the reader will simply make something up to fill the vacuum. "You mean they were brothers? I thought they were gay lovers and that's why the macho bartender got on their case." We talk about the Loose Reader, who is able to create the most fantastic cathedrals in the air out of the smallest slips of the author.

We discuss matters of technique and of craft. "This is a first-person story told by Lucy, and since she never went to the trial, how can she know all this stuff about the quality of the light coming through the courtroom window?" We ruminate on the seductiveness of the first person, how it seems easy initially but subsequently becomes very hard. We look at texts in which the author seems trapped in the first person, unable to find a way to look around the narrator, or rise above the narrator. We discuss strategies to avoid such pitfalls.

Inevitably we will come upon a text that is hiding in abject

naturalism, where the author creates chronological lists of events rather than selecting some events over others. "I don't know what is important in this story. I don't know what I'm supposed to be paying attention to because everything is treated the same. I mean, all this stuff could happen, but what's the point? What am I supposed to make of it?" The question is rhetorical, of course, because if the text doesn't answer it, it doesn't get answered. The text stands alone, without an explicator, as it does in life.

Because writing is an extension of reading, and because the students have been reading all their lives, it is understandable that the two activities might blur somewhat in their minds. Although it is certainly a good thing that their writing is informed by their reading—indeed, at the most basic level they wouldn't be able to write anything at all if it weren't—it has its dangers. The creation of metaphors and similes, for instance. "The boy hopped up and down," writes a bright student whose intuition, sense of rhythm and experience as a reader tell her a metaphor or simile is needed to complete the sentence, "like beads of water on a hot frying pan." In the rush to meet the demands of intuition and rhythm she has written a weak metaphor. She has forgotten the function of the device, which is to make something crystal clear, to reduce to essence. She has tried to *amplify*, to *add on*, rather than reduce.

Consider John Banville's description of a sound from a very young, practically newborn infant. "In his cot the child made a sound in his sleep like a rusty hinge being opened." He could have stopped with "sleep," but he particularized the sound, reduced it, as it were, by bringing in the rusty hinge (creating a frisson of recognition for anyone who's had a child). John Updike's comparison of the Colosseum to "a ruined wedding cake" is a visual reduction of great power. The point is these experi-

enced writers understand the function of metaphor and simile. The bright student did not. She allowed the reader in her, the mimetic reader, to supersede the writer in her at the moment of composition. Once again, it is up to the student to devise a solution to the hopping-boy sentence. The workshops cannot teach the magic of making thrilling metaphors, but they can at least discuss their function, what it is they're supposed to be doing. Precision.

A problem that sometimes comes up is a narrative that looks like a story—controlled language, dialogue, description, some kind of plot or shape—but is in fact only a mimetic stringing together of various devices that the writer has absorbed as a reader. I do not mean copying, I mean empty writing. Techniques learned while reading narratives that are actually about something are applied in the creation of texts whose *raison d'être* is nothing more than the re-creation of the techniques for their own sake. Lacking any emotional or intellectual engine, pressure or emerging reason why the reader should continue to read, such texts are stillborn. Happily, this is most often a short phase for young writers, but it can require a good deal of energy to get past it. In truth, writing is a mixture of knowing what you're doing and not knowing what you're doing. John Cheever once told me he never knew how any of his short stories would end, and had to discover the ending and how to get there while in the act of writing each one of them. So even to a master it is not an unknown experience to look down at what you've written, decide it looks like a story and go forward on faith. The author creates the text, and the text whispers to the author, but for this to happen there must be pressure—the text must be in the service of something, even if the author is not yet quite sure what that something is—there must be forward momentum. Mimetic texts are invariably static. Neither do they whisper what they want to become.

The workshop cannot tell or teach a student what his or her text should be in the service of. Such presumption would be outrageous. It wouldn't work in any case. If the text is to have pressure, it must be the author's pressure, which can only come from inside.

Many elements of good narrative fiction cannot be directly learned in a workshop. Narrative drive, metaphor, depth of characterization, wit, dynamics of pitch, humor, narrative authority and a dozen other things are too complex to be broken down intellectually. We should talk about them—talk around them—when they come up in a text, but I suspect that in the end it is the intuitive preconscious forces at work in the writer that matter the most, a certain tense alertness to language being perhaps the most basic. Workshops can help students to dare to trust intuition, or at least lessen their fear of it. Experienced writers know Hemingway was correct when he said the larger part of the iceberg is hidden under the water, and they know that when they are doing their best work, more is going on than they can consciously describe. So be it. The art lifts the artist.

Art cannot be made by committee. Any such use of a workshop will be counterproductive. Thus the student who is "up" should not be looking for solutions from the other students or from the teacher. The student should be looking for problems in the text that he or she had not been aware of. In a good workshop this becomes clear in a matter of hours. (Failure to understand this has led to many a canard from uninformed commentators about what they imagine to be going on at Iowa—the existence of an "Iowa short story," for example, or the assumption that a prevailing aesthetic or style exists that is drummed into the students. Not so. The Iowa Workshop attempts to respond to what each student brings, and each student is unique. The briefest look at the variety in the work of

the students—to say nothing of the famous graduates—is the proof.)

Neither can art be made by learning a set of rules and applying them, as is the case, say, with plane geometry. The young writer may well be guided by hints or suggestions that might look like rules, but are in fact only observations not meant to be applied universally. I am reminded of working on a tune with the late jazz musician Paul Desmond—myself on piano and the master on saxophone. At one point, improvising the voicings as I moved from one chord to another, Paul stopped the music, leaned over the keyboard and showed me a better way to do it. "Usually," he said, "but not always, we try to retain all notes common to both chords." Exactly so in a writing workshop. Suggestions are made in that spirit—"usually, but not always."

The workshop concentrates on matters of craft, as it should, but hints, suggestions and thought experiments flow continuously through the semester, offerings whose usefulness is privately determined by each student. Here is a list—notes jotted down by one of my students over a period of three weeks—suggestive of the sorts of things that come up: "Characterization is built not through repetition but through layering . . . The text should imply, so the reader can infer . . . Dramatization is crucial. Too much telling infantilizes the reader . . . The text informs to alert the writer as to its manifest destiny [Cheever] . . . Written dialogue is very different from spoken, or 'real' dialogue . . . degraded language can degrade a character . . . A text must not have amnesia, each sentence should be linked to all that came before . . . Rhythms should vary," and so forth and so on. These are observations of my own, springing from the discussion of various student texts. Part of the workshop experience is older writers working with younger writers, a sort of atelier where the older writers, who have presumably produced signifi-

cant work, imply that they have "been there" about some issue, and put forward thoughts for what they are worth. Students seem eager for such information, and I've sometimes wondered if they are not in fact training me to give it, so quickly do they reach for their pens when I get into that mode. I do believe they understand that the value, if any, of such observations lies in their ability to expand the way one thinks about certain problems, rather than their efficacy in immediately solving them.

Many good things happen outside the classroom. At Iowa, the students are in residence for two years in what is for almost all of them a mildly exotic environment: a calm college town in the Midwest where they tend to eat in the same restaurants, go to the same bars, theaters, concerts and grocery stores. They get to know each other very well, and many of them find two or three contemporaries who prove to be particularly sensitive, smart and sympathetic readers. A good deal of discussion about one or another text goes on in coffeehouses, over e-mail or the telephone as a student tries out a couple of paragraphs at one o'clock in the morning. (Allan Gurganus, for instance, found some special readers when he was a student here years ago whom he still consults.) The value of this interplay cannot be overstated, and may well be a critical factor in the integration of whatever may have been learned in class.

At Iowa, young writers get to work with at least four different teachers during the course of their stay. Each teacher has his or her own approach, using methods only indirectly connected to the others, so that the students become aware that the process is more circular than linear. But a common theme is that the students be focused on process rather than project. Students tend to cling to the texts that got them into the workshop in the first place, deeply and understandably worried that the magic might not strike again, that the magic is unpredictable. They mistakenly think that only their strong work is significant and that

their weak work is a total waste of time. They fear being exposed as impostors.

The workshop asserts that it is process that counts. All the work is necessary to move ahead, hence it is all valuable. Every writer creates weak, middling and strong work. No one ever knows when lightning will strike, and we are all, much of the time, waiting for it. But we are not passive. We write, we struggle, we take risks. We work to be ready for the lightning when it comes, to be worthy of it, to be able to handle it rather than be destroyed by it. (Success has ruined more writers than failure.) Writing, sayeth the workshop, is a way of life. You either sign on or you don't.