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In Defense of Creative-Writing Classes

Richard Hugo

I believe worthwhile things can't be justified. I would never try to justify sex, fishing, baseball, or Mozart. My grandfather used to say that some whiskey is better than others, but there is no bad whiskey. That might well apply to sex and Mozart. They seem to be in a class of their own.

Creative-writing classes seem better put in a class with fishing and baseball. I've had bad fishing. I've seen and played bad baseball, and I've seen and taught bad creative-writing classes.

Let's put one matter aside. I'm not getting into some semantic rhubarb about the term "creative writing." Call it "imaginary writing" or whatever you want. It is called "creative writing" in most places, and you know what I'm talking about.

It's not new. For around 400 years it was a requirement of every student's education. In the English-speaking world, the curriculum for grammar and high school students included the writing of "verses." In the nineteenth century, when literary education weakened or was dropped from elementary and secondary education, colleges picked it up, all but the creative writing. Creative writing was missing for 100 years or so, but in the past 40 years it has returned.

It was never really missing, just missing from educational institutions. Writing is hard and writers need help. Pound was a creative-writing teacher for Eliot, Williams, Hemingway, and Yeats. Yeats, by Pounds admission, was Pound's creative-writing teacher in return. Nothing odd about that. If we creative-writing teachers are doing our job, we are learning from the students. If we are writers as well as teachers, we are also stealing from them, and they from us. As long as people write, there will be creative-writing teachers. It's nice to be on the payroll again after a century or more of going unemployed.

So, if any defense is needed, it is the defense of creative writing in school, specifically, if we are speaking of college, in the English department, where creative writing seems to find itself. Creative writing belongs in the university for the same reason other subjects do: because people will pay to study them. If you challenge the right of creative writing to be in the university, to be fair you'd have to challenge a long list of other subjects in the catalogue. (Not a bad idea, but let's not wreck the economy beyond repair.)

The English department seemed a logical place for creative writing, perhaps because it was already involved with other writing, critical and expository. It can be argued that all writing is creative writing, since if one is writing the way one should, one does not know what will be on the page until it is there. Discovery remains the ideal. Another reason for putting creative writing under English is the assumption that reading and writing are closely related. It is even assumed that reading naturally precedes writing, though common sense tells us that in the beginning that could not have been the case.

From experience and observation, I've come to believe reading has as serious a relation to writing as do any number of activities such as staring pensively out the window or driving to Laramie. A very serious relation at times. At other times no relation at all. The writing of a poem or story is a creative act, and by "creative" I mean it contains and feeds off its own impulse. It is difficult and speculative to relate that impulse to any one thing other than itself. Please understand, I'm speaking of the impulse to write and not the finished work.

Sometimes I talk about the triggering subject, about locating a home for the impulse to the poem. I'm trying to let students know that like Baudelaire's albatross, our chances of flying off to the beautiful selves we always were increase if we start out with our talons on deck, even if we must endure the teasing and ridicule of those coarse Philistine sailors. I'm convinced that a genuine impulse to write is so deep and volatile it needs no triggering device other than the one it already has. When not writing, a writer may search for a triggering device, and literature is one of several places to find it. But the urge to search came from need, and that remains mysterious, evidently complete in itself.

So here we are, in the English department, in some ways privileged, in others the victims of bigotry surprisingly unsubtle, coming from educated colleges.

And we are privileged. Let me cite some evidence. For about 100 years we weren't here and no one seemed to miss us. I'll clear some of the air right now by admitting I believe in the traditional teaching of literature and I believe that the teaching of literature is the most important function of an English department. I don't know if the present Ph.D. system is the best way to prepare teachers of literature. It seems to have worked well in many cases, and I'm not imaginative enough to dream serious alternatives. One thing it does not do is teach people to write. When I read some academic writing I marvel that as common and everyday as language is, it would have the effrontery to get in the way of all that thinking. I've seen sentences that defy comprehension written by people with doctorates in English from our best universities. So have you. And I doubt that academic writing will improve until academics believe Valéry, who said he couldn't think of anything worse than being right. In much academic writing, clarity runs a poor second to invulnerability.

One of our privileges as creative writers is that we are vulnerable people who hold jobs in an environment where self-protection is a way of life. Our vulnerability can be enjoyable, perhaps even enviable. In some ways it is phony. I confess I'm not nearly as naïve as I sometimes appear, and the innocence feigned by some creative writers approaches being offensive. Our vulnerability can also be unhealthy, the social counterpart of the kind of exposure some report to the police.

Not only does the Ph.D. system graduate many people whose writing approaches the disgraceful, there is contempt for good writing among some scholars. When I was in graduate school it was common to hear a published scholar who wrote clearly referred to as a popularizer.

Scholars seem to assume that if you can read you can write. It's sad to see someone with a fresh Ph.D. coast for a few years, understandably after such a grueling period of work, then embark on a book. It is a struggle because the scholar doesn't realize one simple thing about writing: it is like shooting a basketball. You've got to stay in shape and practice to do it well. It is not a natural reward of study, and having an education does not mean you can write well whenever you want.

We creative writers are privileged because we can write declarative sentences, and we can write declarative sentences because we are less interested in being irrefutably right then we are in the dignity of language itself. I find words beautiful that ring with psychic truth and sound meant. If such a choice were possible, I would far rather mean what I say than say what I mean. To use language well requires self-sacrifice, even giving up pet ideas. George Garrett had no small point when he proposed that all literature teachers be made to take a course in creative writing: "they might at least learn a measure of common humility."

We are privileged because we are supported by those who are threatened by our cavalier intellectuality. Scholars look for final truths they will never find. Creative writers concern themselves with possibilities that are always there to the receptive.

And we are privileged in other ways. The rewards of our teaching are relatively immediate and tangible. I often find ex-students published in literary magazines. At Iowa where I visited for a year, Mike Ryan and Maura Stanton, who both later won the Yale Series of Younger Poets contest, were in my class—though I'm sure they learned little from me *that* year. James Welch, Dave McElroy, and Rick DeMarinis have been in my classes at Montana. If I'm corrupt enough to give myself some undeserved credit, it is because pride blinds. I would guess that around forty of my ex-students are now publishing. Many creative-writing teachers can list far more than I can.

Compare that with the lot of the academic professor. I mean a fine academic professor, a whiz in class, one who brings an energy to teaching born out of love of the material, whose stimulating lectures ignite in students more than they knew they could know. Unless that professor is lucky enough to be in one of a dozen or so schools, he has at best a general sense of what has happened in the minds of his students. The tangible evidence is slight. Years from now one may take a Ph.D. somewhere and write a fine critical

book. One. Maybe two. In a lifetime of giving much, the good academic professor will finally realize little in return.

Side note: Teachers, like policemen, firemen, and service personnel, should be able to retire after twenty years with full pension. Our risks may be different, but they are real. In twenty years most teachers have given their best.

I'm not sure the sudden popularity of creative-writing courses is a privilege. It may be our ruination. It is becoming a sore point in English departments. The enrollment in creative writing increases and the enrollment in literature courses is going down. I'm not sure why and I'm not sure the trend is healthy.

There's more than a little truth in the explanations offered by some academic professors. They cite the increasing narcissism of students, the egocentric disregard of knowledge, the laziness, the easy good grades to be had in the writing courses. And in creative writing, especially the undergraduate classes, we get more than our share of ego trippers who don't want to write any more than they want to read. Certainly in most of our academically exclusive schools we find creative writing missing or offered as a grudging gesture. And in this schools as well as in many of our large state universities, creative writers suffer a status something like Japanese prisoners in World War II.

As for grades, if anyone will tell me how to grade creative writing, I'll be grateful. The only people who seem to feel creative writing should be graded are administrators far removed from the firing line. Many creative-writing teachers give high grades for a very good reason. If you write you know how difficult it is. A lot of people teaching freshman composition can't write much better than the students and have no idea how hard good writing is. Another reason for high grades in creative writing is that most teachers of creative writing disdain grades and are trying to tell others what they should realize themselves—grades don't mean a thing. When a student asks me for a grade I try to let him know I don't care what his grade is and he shouldn't either. I'll give you an *A* if you promise to feel cheap. But that's naïve, I fear, trying to improve human nature.

Other reasons may account for the dwindling popularity of lit courses and the increased demand for creative writing. Some lie in the way the mind reacts to different forms of knowledge. For example, here are two pieces of knowledge, one literary, the other biological.

> 1. In John Dryden's "An Essay on Dramatic Poesy," toward the end of his long discourse, Neander says to Crites, "As for your instance of Ben Jonson, who, you say, writ exactly without the help of rhyme; you are to remember 'tis only an aid to a luxuriant fancy, which his was not: as he did not want imagination, so none ever said he had much to spare. Neither was verse then refined so much to be an help to that age, as it is to ours. Thus then the second thoughts being usually the best, as receiving the maturest digestion from judgment, and the last and most mature product of those thoughts being artful and laboured

> verse, it may well be inferred, that verse is a great help to a luxuriant fancy; and this is what that argument which you opposed was to evince."
>
> 2. All groupers are born females and later become males.

Which offers the most interesting possibilities? For the scholar? For the critic? For the poet? For a stand-up comedian? When you read the two pieces above, some of you may have become poets for a moment. A few may have become comedians. If you were still a scholar or a critic, you may have had some regrets. If you felt excited about the imagistic and metaphorical possibilities suggested by the odd biological history of groupers, you might head for a creative-writing course. When universities were smaller and more exclusive, you were either ignored or forced to adjust. You studied Dryden, and, if you weren't interested, feigned interest or you got out. Today the department budget in most state universities is based on enrollment statistics. A department may not get more budget line positions if the enrollment goes up, but it might very well love them when enrollment goes down. The professorial administrator is everywhere, and English departments are not above using statistics swelled by people who find that with some subjects the difference between knowing and not knowing is simply too small to bother about. It is better than going under to accommodate people for whom knowing is less fun at times than guessing.

It hardly endears creative writing to the average academic that he has spent years of hard work getting the Ph.D. degree, involving himself deeply in scholarship and criticism, and now his position depends on the presence of people who don't care about his expertise. It may get worse. A lot of creative writers, students and teachers, don't help the situation. They don't give the academic, who often has much to offer them, a chance. There is hostility, and in some universities it is bad.

Happily, Montana has very little hostility between creative writers and academics. An occasional nasty remark, usually disguised and sometimes intended as a joke, and some rather bizarre treatment of graduate creative-writing students by a couple of isolated academics is about as far as it has gone. That is not the case everywhere. But we have a tradition of creative writing that goes back many years. Walter van Tilburg Clark taught creative writing for years at Montana. My first creative-writing teacher at the University of Washington, Grant Redford, a fine teacher with a wretched class, came from the University of Montana. Faculty and students, creative writers have enjoyed full status there.

At the risk of sounding self-righteous, I've found that in schools where such hostility runs deep, it usually originates with the academics. The old explanations are easy to hop on: the professor of literature always dreamed of being a poet, academics are jealous of the psychic energy of writers, academics feel that creative writers don't work hard enough. Whatever there is to these explanations, I find them wanting. I've come to believe that the hostility between academics and creative writers is simply the result of small-mindedness on both parts. It is failure to recognize and grant each other's worth. It is a xenophobia not worthy of people who call themselves educated.

I started teaching at the age of forty. In the fourteen years I've been at it I've talked to many students and faculty, and I've reluctantly come to a few conclusions. It hurts to state why I believe students are turning away from literature courses because even at fifty-four maturity is not my strong point, and polemic tends

to make me either nervous or bored and withdrawn. I do not like a fight, and I hope what I say doesn't start one.

A young recent Ph.D. asked me to attend his class to discuss some of my poems with his students. I like the young man and was pleased he wanted to teach my work. It was a good class. The teacher had done his work well. That was obvious from the enthusiastic attention the students brought to the work being discussed and the intelligent way they made points.

One student asked how I'd come to write "The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir," one of the poems they were studying. My answer was straightforward. I'd had a love affair. The woman dumped me for someone else. I was brokenhearted and vengeful, but cowardly. So in real life I suffered but in the poem I had my revenge—at least early in the poem.

A few days after the class, the teacher told me he had been very surprised at my answer, that he didn't know poets used life that way. I was surprised at his surprise and asked him where he'd assumed poems came from. He replied that he'd believed a writer sits along in a room and makes things up.

Understand this is a bright young man. A good teacher. He has a Ph.D. in literature from one of our very best universities. Where did he get such ideas about writers? The answer is obvious. He got them from the same place he got his education.

One of my reluctant conclusions is that the Ph.D. system tends to train people to teach literature as if it is some grand, mysterious system that has little or nothing to do with human existence. Obviously enough good teachers come out of the system to justify it. But I fear such a system attracts its fair share of people who are eager to put knowledge between themselves and their lives. To put it bluntly, dull people. As the punch line of the old joke goes, "I've been going through my notes and it turns out I *have* read *Hamlet."*

I've even heard academics refer to popular teachers as "entertainers." To have interest in literature and to communicate that interest is of secondary value at best. True integrity is often willfully equated with dullness. That's not a recent development, either. If anything, it was worse when I was a student.

Another reason for declining student interest in literature courses is a tendency of academic professors to establish and maintain emotional advantages over the students. They seem to have acquired knowledge in order to feel superior to those without it. A strange attitude for a teacher—not wanting to give and share. They're not as good at this as business executives are. Maybe that's why they must limit their victims to the young. One rule for all who want the advantage over others: never show your feelings. The capacity to hide feelings is the one trait I have found common to all high-level corporation executives during my thirteen years in industry. Of course, it helps if you don't have any feelings to hide.

This tendency to hold the advantage over the student is not a new development, either. It too was worse when I was in school. But then it was considered normal, and it did not turn students away from the literature courses. Students were less sophisticated and assumed that superior knowledge gave license for

behaving as if one had superior social status. A lot of students today would rather not learn Milton than be made to feel inferior because they didn't already know his work.

That makes academics sound petty. But damn it, some of them are petty. In one large university the senior faculty voted against publishing the graduate catalogue because they objected to their names' appearing with names of junior faculty members. It's a wonder what so-called educated people will do to look important. It's not wonder that a lot of young people don't want to study under them.

If I had to limit myself to one criticism of academics it would be this: they distrust their responses. They feel that if a response can't be defended intellectually, it lacks validity. One literature professor I know was asked as he left a movie theater if he had liked the movie, and he replied, "I'm going to have to go home and think about it." What he was going to think about is not whether he liked the movie, but whether he could defend his response to it. If he decided he couldn't, presumably he'd hide his feelings or lie about them.

Academics like these, and fortunately they are far from all the academics, give students the impression that there's nothing in literature that could be of meaningful personal interest. If I seem to be sniping, forgive me. There are great academics and I'm proud to know some of them, glad that I can work in the same profession with them. If my criticism seems harsh, please know that I consider academic professors indispensable to an English department. Whatever the curses of creative writing, it is still a luxury. If there's a choice between dropping Shakespeare studies or advanced poetry writing, I would not defend retention of the writing course. It is not as important to the education of students.

Whatever my criticisms of some academics, I'm old enough to know that education as a way of improving the self remains a fluffy ideal. Academics have no corner on human failure. We creative-writing teachers have at least our fair share, and speaking personally, I'm in no position to be critical of the weaknesses of others. We must live with some things. There may not be enough good people to go around, and most people aren't very good at what they do. The excellent teacher may be as rare as the excellent automobile mechanic. The Ph.D. system may not attract enough good people, but the M.F.A. system in creative writing has some shortcomings too.

One glaring weakness of the system is that it places in teaching positions people who have not demonstrated their impulse to write is real and lasting. It is simply too easy to pass oneself off as a writer in a university. I'm in favor of all M.F.A. graduates remaining out of school for at least ten years before they are considered for a teaching position. This is a cruel proposal, given the economic pressure to build a career. For it to work humanely, schools should be willing to count that ten years as time on the job and to hire the write at the associate professor level, but without tenure until the writer demonstrated his ability to teach creative writing. This way, one will have already published and presumably would continue. The writing is there to be judged, published or not, and the writer has demonstrated a durable impulse to write. One would hold or lose the job on the basis of one's ability to teach. Creative-writing instructors often write and publish because that is their role and they must do it to hold their job. Once they receive tenure, they stop writing. We are perpetuating ourselves and the system.

Some may hop on this idea and say: yes, and then the writer would be forced to subject himself or herself to outside experience. Experience outside the university is just what the writer needs. But I am doubtful. I believe the writer creates experience as needed to satisfy impulses to write. The odd and not so odd are everywhere, and landscapes never stop. For a writer it is a matter of receiving, responding, converting, and appropriating. A writer will do that anywhere.

The graduate writing program has some serious problems. One is how we judge students for acceptance to the program. I think Yeats was right when he observed that what comes easy for the bad poet comes with great difficulty for the good. We accept those who, in our opinion, seem to be the best writers. But we may be accepting those who have absorbed technique rapidly because no obsessions normal to the good writer were there to get in the way. In forty years a celebrated poet may turn out to be someone who was rejected by graduate writing programs. I see no way around this. We have to go on the samples of writing submitted. The strength of the impulse behind a piece of writing is a hard thing to judge, and we are wise not to try. Most young writers haven't learned to submit to their obsessions.

We can't ignore the overwhelming evidence in favor of creative-writing classes. Names like Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Kurt Vonnegut, Flannery O'Connor, Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, on and on, testify in one way or another to the validity of writing classes. But let's load the dice and say all the good writers would have done it anyway. Maybe they would have. If I am that fatalistic about writing, how can I justify creative-writing classes? A dozen years or so back I was asked that in front of a huge audience, and my answer is still the same: I don't. I just take the money. This time let me dignify the question with some equally serious answers.

A good creative-writing teacher can save a good writer a lot of time. Writing is tough, and many wrong paths can be taken. If we are doing our job, creative-writing teachers are performing a necessary negative function. And if we are good teachers, we should be teaching the writer ways of doing that for himself all his writing life. We teach how not to write and we teach writers to teach themselves how not to write. When we teach how to write, the student had best be on guard.

What about the student who is not good? Who will never write much? It is possible for a good teacher to get from that student one poem or one story that far exceeds whatever hopes the student had. It may also be of no importance to the world of high culture, but it may be very important to the student. It is a small thing, but it is also small and wrong to forget or ignore lives that can use a single microscopic moment of personal triumph. Just once the kid with bad eyes hit a home run in an obscure sandlot game. You may ridicule the affectionate way he takes that day through a life drab enough to need it, but please stay the hell away from me.

The best argument for a creative-writing class is one I learned long ago, in 1940 in high school. I didn't know I'd learned it until years later, but I'm slow picking up the important lessons. West Seattle High School was fairly middle-class. A few children of Japanese truck farmers and some of us from Youngstown and White Center helped preserve what I snobbishly prefer to think of as peasant vitality. Belle McKensie, the creative-writing teacher, had fiery red hair and shapely legs the boys remarked on outside of class, and she had loud concepts of democracy and equality that she practiced when her temper

didn't interfere. One student, named Hughes (I think), had moved to West Seattle from Oklahoma. One had to be unusually ingratiating and aggressive to find friends among the little snobs who banded together at West Seattle High. I suppose that's standard for a high school. Hughes was shy, a stranger, just one of many of the 2,000 students passing through, unnoticed, lonely, and probably miserable.

One day he read aloud a theme he had written—we had to read our work along to get credit. It was a true story about an evening some older boys had taken him to a whorehouse. He had been fourteen at the time, and he was candid about his fears, his attempts to appear courageous and confident to the older boys, his eventual panic and running away. We were a bit apprehensive when he finished. That story could have gotten him thrown out of most classes in the school. McKensie broke the silence with applause. She raved approval, and we realized we had just heard a special moment in a person's life, offered in honesty and generosity, and we better damn well appreciate it. It may have been the most important lesson I ever learned, maybe the most important lesson one can teach. You are someone and you have a right to your life. Too simple? Already covered by the Constitution? Try to find someone who teaches it. Try to find a student who knows it so well he or she doesn't need it confirmed.

In the thirty-eight years since that day in McKensie's class, I've seen the world tell us with wars and real estate developments and bad politics and odd court decisions that our lives don't matter. That may be because we are too many. Architecture and application form, modern life says that with so many of us we can best survive by ignoring identity and acting as if individual differences do not exist. Maybe the narcissism academics condemn in creative writers is but a last reaching for a kind of personal survival. Anyway, as a sound psychoanalyst once remarked to me dryly, narcissism is difficult to avoid. When we are told in dozens of insidious ways that our lives don't matter, we may be forced to insist, often far too loudly, that they do. A creative-writing class may be one of the last places you can go where your life still matters. Your life matters, all right. It is all you've got for sure, and without it you are dead. These days, the joke is even less funny.

If a lot of people were not already willing to run from their lives, the demand for creative-writing classes would be greater. Disappearing into the hugeness of system is not unattractive. I know. I've attended large universities and worked in giant corporations, and I've found anonymity to be wondrously seductive. Something pulls some of us back from that tempting disappearance. Call it the obsessive and irresistible love of being alive, if you can stand the rhetoric. It is born of the certainty we will disappear fast enough. Oblivion needs no help from us. Long ago, in the first poem in his first book, James Wright told himself and us

> Be glad of the green wall
> You climbed across one day,
> When winter stung with ice
> That vacant paradise.

It is paradise *because* it is vacant, like a blank sheet of paper. It is paradise because the vacancy is there for us to fill momentarily, and we are here to fill it. No matter how justified our despair, we still live in a world where circumstances that make death preferable to life are limited by our revulsion. When

moments that support our awareness of ourselves and each other, fond or sad, immediate or mnemonic, insist, some of us would not deny them any more than we would deny our lives. That anyone or anything says they are not important is vivid proof that they are. Creative-writing classes give us a chance to be glad of the green wall.

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