Inside the Outside: How a Poem Can Still Grow in the Glare of a Writing Workshop

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Beginning

Where to begin? Begin on the outside. And then work your way in. Gradually.
How to begin? With one eye on the surface. And the other turned in.
And the third eye?
Looking up at the mountain. Or off into the distance of the desert.

The word 'poetry' derives from the Greek word *poiesis*. And intriguingly, *poiesis* does not refer only to the writing of verse. It simply means 'making': to make, in general. To make a boat, for crossing from one side to the other. To make a house, for sheltering from the wind and the rain. To make a bed. A cup for drinking. A stringed instrument. A pair of boots for walking into the distance. A poem too, for that matter.

How to proceed? Crab-wise.
With one unsteady step forward and two steps stumbling back.
With one word placed down uncertainly after the other. Over and over and over again.

> You can write on a wall with a fish heart, it's because of the phosphorous. They eat it. There are shacks like that down along the river. I am writing this to be as wrong as possible to you. Replace the door when you leave, it says. Now you tell me how wrong that is, how long it glows. Tell me.

Anne Carson said that (*Short Talks* 56).

Leaving an afterglow on the heart long after the words have left the lambent surface of the page.

'People go looking for one thing, and find another [...] Perhaps for something to be found, the only thing that matters is that there be searching – certainly that is the way in the writing of poems.' Jane Hirshfield said that (15).

Small yellow Cape canaries, finches actually (*Serinus canicollis*), search outside my window for the tiny pollen cones that have fallen onto the ground from the row of Monterey pines (*Pinus radiata*) in my neighbour's property.

'It is impossible to write meaningless sequences. In a sense the next thing always belongs. In the world of the imagination, all things belong. If you take that on faith, you may be foolish, but foolish like a trout.' Richard Hugo said that (5).

'But he had only ever owned one pair of boots his whole life. And they were black. And they followed him wherever he went.' I said that ("A Short Walk").

The Problem

I have to say it. I am a fraud. And I am a liar. For there is a fundamental contradiction at the heart of my creative life and practice.

As a writer – as a poet, a playwright, a writer of short stories – I believe that my works reach their completion best, their true fulfilment, after being left alone in the dark: private, uninterrupted and unwatched, germinating silently beneath the heavy earth. Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert, in his poem "The Longobards", wrote: 'In darkness and in silence my body was ripening' (138). And here instead of 'body', I think 'words', 'body' of words. And this is more to me than a belief. Much more. In daily, nightly, painfully slow practice, this approach, this methodology, as it were, has been confirmed over and over to me. It is I suppose, in some senses, an unashamedly anti-rationalist approach. And it has everything to do with surrender, with acquiescence, with trust. Trust that beneath and deep within that dark soil, something indeed is happening. That the dark is, in fact, in D. H. Lawrence's words, 'a living dark' (iv). That it is – to continue my admittedly clichéd metaphor of vegetation – rich, fertile, fecund. Productive.

Of course, I cannot claim any originality for this idea. In a letter of 1817, John Keats described poetry's relationship to the unknown, to mystery, to his brothers George and Tom. In this letter, he famously ascribed poetic inspiration to a kind of anti-talent. 'Negative Capability', he called it, and explained it as a writer's ability to accept 'uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (53).

And Athol Fugard in his *Notebooks* wrote:

> How thin and insecure is that little beach of white sand we call the conscious. I've always known that in my writing it is the dark troubled sea of which I know nothing, save its presence, that carried me. I've always felt that creating was a fearless and a timid, a despairing and a hopeful, launching out into that unknown. With me it has never been so much a question of something to say as of something, or nothing, to find – the "searchingness" someone called it. (73)

And yet, at the same time, I am also a teacher of creative writing, a teacher with almost twenty years' experience in supervising a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate student projects. I believe that writing is a manifestation of new understanding or configurations of knowledge, and that these forms of knowledge, while hermeneutical, open-ended and actively evolving, are not ultimately either abstract or arbitrary. There is a definitive making involved. A thing is made. Brought into the world and then left there. *Poiesis*: a bringing forth. And this thing can be looked at and turned upside down and inside out, and understood. And if it can be understood, then it can be taught. And the understanding of it can be taught. But most importantly, the making of it can be taught too. For writing is a cognitive process. It is not, ultimately, like breathing, which happens without will or reflection or the necessity for understanding even. And part of my method of teaching this making – of guiding other writers through the making of their own pieces – is the workshop format.

In her article "The Rhetoric of the Prose Fiction Workshop",

Jean McNeil describes the workshop model of a creative writing class as

> a peer-evaluation seminar where students, presided over by a lecturer/teacher, read and evaluate student work in progress. The ethos of the workshop is that each member offers a response to the work in progress of their peer, a response which can be analytical, subjective, thematic, technical or an amalgam of the above. (133)

Granted, in any creative writing workshop, the text is still largely emergent, in-process. It is, as McNeil goes on to argue, largely

> a series of suppositions, experiments, gestures and explorations, no matter to what degree its author might believe it is finished work. In reality, in the […] workshop we are tasked with assessing the potentialities and intent of the text: what is this piece of fiction *trying* to be? What is its optimal expression of itself? (133)

My employment of the workshop model does not, of course, equate to an unproblematic adoption of this teaching/learning methodology for discovery and invention. Finuala Dowling confessed to the following: 'I am slightly allergic to the word "workshop" with its undertone of good works and hidden agendas, and its slight odour of damp garage' (1). And so there will always remain the question of how to breathe life into this

potentially exhausted method.

Nevertheless, largely because of its flexibility and its receptivity to a multiplicity of individual approaches, the workshop format in creative production has formed the basis of my group facilitation as well as my one-on-one teaching and supervision. And in its most fundamental logic, the workshop model is premised on the idea that knowledge can be reviewed, shared, dissected and put together again, all in the full glare of other people. Public, probed and prodded, scrutinised.

Without prejudicing the ultimate outcome.

Is there thus a tension in me between the writer and the teacher? Between the champion of the dark, the ungraspable and the unconscious, and the pedagogue of explication, illumination and argument?

Am I saying one thing to myself, and another to my students? Or is this possible tension between these two facets within me based on a false understanding of so-called inspiration and the processes of artistic creation, of *poiesis*?

Are there in fact, ways in which the mysterious space of individual creative production can be preserved and even deepened during and through a collaborative workshop?

The Challenge

> To speak with blind alleys
> about what's facing,
> about its
> expatriate
> sense –:

to chew this
bread, with
writing teeth.

Remember this poem by Paul Celan (*Snow Part* 51). I will return to it later.

Another admission first.

I am not a gardener. I cannot grow anything. I do not have green fingers. Unlike my grandmother, who could push the proverbial dry stick in the ground and it would grow. If anything, you could say that I have green eyes. I like to look at the things that grow – the wild banana and the fever trees outside my window, the yellow pincushion proteas, the spekboom and the spinach. And I like the way that these things taste – wild grass, eggplant, broccoli, peas in their pods (if the baboons don't get to them). And I like the way they smell – orange blossom, jasmine, dhanya, yesterday-today-and-tomorrow – drenched in memory and evocation. And I can stand for hours (not literally) watering them. But, I have never been good at growing them. I suppose I don't understand how growing works. I think I understand the inside life of a stone more than the life of a vegetable or a flower.

But one thing I do know. You cannot grow anything by digging it up all the time to see how it's growing. To see what's happening down there, inside the invisible dark. That much I know.

So how then can I suppose that it should be any different when it comes to teaching the making of a poem in the context of a writing workshop? Is there a difference between the maker who makes and the maker who teaches the making?

My approach has always been to bring these two aspects together in the learning space. And thus I learn, as we learn. And thus I have learned (slowly, painfully slowly) to understand and follow the inward way that a poem has of coming to be itself, being itself, the ways a poem acts out its constituent parts inside itself, the ways it presents itself to itself, its internal operations. And in the same way, I can bring this experience and this understanding to the classroom, and I can fast-track the process for the students. As Hugo explains:

> 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. (64)

Now to return to Celan.

There is a 'blind alley' that faces itself. It leads nowhere but back into itself. The poem's central gesture ('to speak') – its speech act – is an address to and with this sense (what he calls an 'expatriate sense', Celan himself being a kind of expatriate in Paris) of being in the world, while also of being a writer ('with writing teeth'). A difficult phrasing to follow, I realise. But this circular pattern in the poem is worth bearing in mind. It is crucially teased out, self-

prospected, in his 1960 "Meridian" speech on being awarded the Georg Büchner Prize for Literature, where he discusses searching for and finding 'something – like language – immaterial, yet earthly, terrestrial, something in the shape of a circle' (*Collected Prose* 50).

So I go back to the beginning, and I begin again.
Begin on the outside. And work your way in.

> We had been talking life, fruit and vegetables. Now it was time to keep quiet. Shhhhh. Ladies and gentlemen, it is time to throw down your bones. Someone has to fill the hole of this grave.

Mangaliso Buzani said that in the long prose poem "A Naked Bone" (73).

The Method

In his seminal essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", T. S. Eliot describes a poet's mind as a kind of scientific laboratory or chemistry testing kit: 'a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together' (*On Poetry and Poets* 72). What matters, for Eliot, is not the 'intensity of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place' (*On Poetry and Poets* 72). So, what matters is not the individual qualities of all these disparate components (elements, to continue with the language

of chemistry), but rather what happens when they are combined or fused under pressure, a process that would seem to unlock some hiddenness, some myriad potentialities, previously absent. A kind of whole as more than the sum of its parts. Hirshfield explains:

> Creative discoveries are made by generative re-combination: disparate elements brought together in a way not previously seen, then recognised as making a useful whole. Cognition begins with the construction and distinction of patterns. (36)

Pattern is an important word and concept. It is tempting to dive straight into its deliciously cool significations and resonances. But I don't want to get ahead of myself.

So back for a moment. In order to go forward. 'You say I am repeating / Something I have said before. I shall say it again. / Shall I say it again?' (Eliot, *Collected Poems* 201). The 'searchingness', Fugard termed it (73).

What is there about poetry – about what poetry is and how it uniquely functions – that can be activated by the writing teacher in order to counter the glare of the workshop format?

The departure point for me is in Terry Eagleton's conception of a poem as a 'phenomenology of language' (21). In his incisive and accessible book *How to Read a Poem*, Eagleton presents, among other things, a defence of the language of poetry as primarily a thing in itself:

> Poetry is a kind of phenomenology of language – one in which the relation between word and meaning (or

> signifier and signified) is tighter than it is in everyday speech. There are several different ways of saying 'Take a seat', but only one way of saying 'The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass'. Poetry is language in which the signified or meaning is *the whole process of signification itself*. It is thus always at some level language which is about itself. There is something circular or self-referential about even the most publicly engaged of poems. The meaning of a poem is far less abstractable from its total process of signification than is the meaning of a road sign. This is not to say that you cannot give a summary of a poem's content, just as you can of a police cadet's manual. But the former résumé is always likely to be less informational than the latter. Poetry is something which is done to us, not just said to us. The meaning of its words is closely bound up with the experience of them. (21)

Think about Celan's 'blind alleys' that face back upon themselves.

Or this by Hirshfield: 'Poems, if they are any good at all, hold a knowledge elusive and multiple, unsayable in any other way' (36). Unsayable in any other way because the saying is not a window through to something else; the words of a poem are our experience of them. I will let Eagleton back in again, because he expresses it so well: 'A poem constitutes the very things it is about. In this sense, every poem curves back on itself' (69). In this sense, too, arguably there is no *about* in a poem. At the risk of inviting accusations of aestheticism, the How is as important as the What. Or a more accurate way of saying this is that the

subject of a poem (the about/what) should always serve the language of the poem, and not the other way round.

This is an important first step in understanding for students who sit together in the white humming light of the seminar room around the very large table – so large there is barely space for them to pull their chairs out before they hit the wall. While in the tree outside (why have I not noticed what type of tree it is?) a pair of grey hadeda ibises (*Bostrychia hagedash*) have raised their three chicks in a scrappy, precarious nest.

Names are important, you see. All things have names. Nouns are important. They can be shared around a table. I'll give you mine, if you give me yours. They can swell in the mind to three times their size. And they're so much more important than adjectives. Except the very simple kind. Keep it simple. Always. Especially if the subject is large.

> follow me
> close your eyes
> think of the moon
> contemplate my river
> and let us cross

The Congolese poet Tchicaya U Tam'si wrote that (3).

Listening to the Inside of the Outside

So let us cross over and continue on the dark side of words, where the shadow of language casts its weird light on Celan's 'blind alley' that faces itself. Under terrible pressure, the white-hot intensity of a poem's language – a pressure not unlike the electromagnetic

force within an atom – the poem crystallises. I have borrowed this word from Carson, who argues: 'To understand and to keep, in however diminished a form, some picture of the inside crystal of things […] is a poet's obligation' (*Economy of the Unlost* 70). Of course, I admit that the spatial metaphor of inside versus outside is misleading. We cannot slowly peel the exterior of a poem away from its interior, and be left holding its appearance in our hand, like a long coil of orange peel. I resist the dichotomy or dualism that this spatial analogy implies – although we love to speak about Form and Content, Language and Meaning, as if they were distinct and independent. A better analogy would be the Möbius strip, which possesses only one side (and only a single boundary), although it looks as if it actually has two sides. Or a sheet of paper, where the verso cannot ever (at least not in this world) be separated from the recto.

Rather, my use of the term 'inside' refers usefully to the experiential moment of writing, the act of poetic creation when the student writer is looking down and listening from within to what is going on all around them and within them and within the poem itself, in a state of what Celan in his "Meridian" speech calls 'attention' (*Collected Prose* 50). Whenever I talk to students about this idea of inner attentiveness – sitting around the big table in the seminar room or around the desk in my small office with my back to the window – the lines from W. B. Yeats's poem "Long-Legged Fly" come to mind:

> His eyes fixed upon nothing
> A hand upon his head.
> *Like a long-legged fly upon the stream*
> *His mind moves upon silence.* (381; emphasis in original)

So, the workshop space, far from being a space of self-consciousness and comparison, even judgement, has the potential to become a place of encounter with the 'inside crystal of things' that Carson describes (*Economy of the Unlost* 70). And this encounter can be facilitated through a conscious but gradual nurturing of trust, openness and introspection that amounts ultimately to a process of listening. Listening *to* and also listening out *for*. This double method of listening is significant. And with students I always use the analogy of a singer in a choir who might close one ear with their hand so that they can hear themselves, attend to themselves.

So. Listen out *to*, and listen out *for*, what?

Finally I can come back to Hirshfield who argued that 'cognition begins with the construction and distinction of patterns'(36). And what is pattern? Pattern is shape. Pattern comprises the characteristic features and identifiable traits of something that give it its distinctiveness, its identity.

And pattern, as in music, as in architecture or design, is repetition.

And in the writing workshop, through attentive listening, students can be guided on how to recognise, how to hear and see (poetry is always a coordination of ear and eye) the internal self-referential logic and coherence that underpins the voice and the energy and form of each of their poems. However transgressive, twisted or weird this logic might be. I cannot stress this latter point enough.

I am always reminded here of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's argument in the *Biographia Literaria* that each poem always 'contains within itself the reasons why it is so and not otherwise' (117).

And so one of the ways that I conceptualise the writing workshop is as a space where students can discover inside their poem the 'reasons why it is so and not otherwise'. So that as they consciously enter into dialogue with the evolving nature of their poem in the writing and re-writing phase, they can make informed choices about its formal characteristics: punctuation, register, mood, length of line, stanzaic structure. Whether wide open and expansive as a field, as in the work of Charles Olson or Mark Rothko, tight and formal like Emily Dickinson or Gwen John, or cruel and crude like Hiromi Itō or Egon Schiele. (I frequently use visual prompts or inspiration in the workshop.)

So that, ultimately, these complex formal and expressive choices will cohere and fit together, and belong and support each other, slotting in and helping the poem move along, instead of hindering it, slowing it down, and ultimately undermining it. As C. D. Wright argues: 'The need for form arises not so much for containment but for support. Form naturally determines the poem's movement, whether it be gradual, teleological, furious or travelling in reverse' (8).

And because of the internal patterning of a poem, I always argue that nothing is insignificant, that every full stop, comma, capital letter or line break is important and functional and contributes to the overall effect.

Yet, how does a student do what I am asking of them in the workshop? How do they achieve this?

I always encourage the student to address the materiality of what they are working with (the individual words, the lines, the sounds, the language itself, yes, ultimately, the language itself), and to ask of this concrete material the same question as above: why are you so and not otherwise?

Another way of putting this would be to say: always ask of these elements what do they want to be, where do they want to go, how do they want to get there? By way of the clear, direct path through the dark forest like Raymond Carver or Makhosazana Xaba? Or circuitously, continually doubling back upon themselves like Fred Wah or Joan Metelerkamp, for example?

Of course, pattern, repetition, is nothing without its counter, which is silence. Or space. The not said. The withholding. What Wallace Stevens (in his poem "The Snowman") intriguingly, even frustratingly, called the 'Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is' (178). Music helps in this case. In the workshops, I often use minimalist composers, such as Arvo Pärt and Philip Glass, to help students attend to the deep well, the dark unseen that must be left behind and between their words. The weight of absence that speaks. The weight of non-presence that gives form to presence. (I refer students to the idea of positive and negative space in drawing.) The weight of time that is the backdrop for everything we say and do. And I immediately recall the words of Mxolisi Nyezwa from his article "Trauma and Image": 'Poetry is the antithesis of death, enlivening our actions and our experience of existence to achieve a sense of new meaning. It is the duty of poetry to keep everybody alive' (20).

But listening, as I discussed earlier, is also a listening *to*. Listening to everything that I have just elaborated on above. Certainly. But more than that. Listening to the poem in its unfolding in the present. Listening to the moment of the present in its material distinctiveness, while at the same time open – wide, wide, wide open – to all possibilities and different solutions. Listening with one ear closed and the other open.

Celan described this process in his "Meridian" speech as a poem 'travel[ling] a certain space in a certain direction, on a certain road'. The idea of movement, becoming, is central to both the method and the nature of poetry for Celan. He continues:

> The poem is lonely. It is lonely and *en route.* Its author stays with it. Does this very fact not place the poem already here, at its inception, in the encounter, *in the mystery of encounter*? The poem intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite. It goes toward it, bespeaks it. For the poem, everything and everybody is a figure of this other toward which it is heading. (*Collected Prose* 49)

And in the same way that in the workshop the poem can be '*en route* […] in the mystery of encounter' into a deeper sense of its potential and what it is, so too of course is the student writer.

En route to a deeper sense of their humanness. And the elusiveness and precariousness of being human.

It is no small thing at all.
It is always a risk. There is no other way. Whether for a student or someone who has been writing for twenty years. It is always a wager. A step toward and into the dark.

With only the small light of the hand to guide.

'With the hand running. Following the writing hand like the painter draws: in flashes. The hand leads to the flowers. From

the heart where passions rise to the fingertips that hear the body thinking', as Hélène Cixous describes it (156).

The workshop can contain and it can activate this mystery of making. The workshop can be the place where a form of thinking and speech different from the solitary experience can be energised, where the glare of the outside does not preclude the intensity of the inside, where instead another pressure can fuse language and emotion into a new compound.

And so, as Eliot writes in "Four Quartets", 'In my end is my beginning […] What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning […] And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time' (*Collected Poems* 204, 221-222).

So I return. Re-turn to face the 'blind alley' of the page.
So we, sitting around the seminar table or my office desk, shuffle our papers, shuffle our feet, look up, then down. We smile, and make the leap.

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