The Multigenre Workshop

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It's nothing new. Many English departments offer such courses at the entry, undergraduate level. At their best, they serve to enlighten the neophyte not only as to the historical differences between the genres, but also as to how all forms of written expression are of a piece. What I am advocating for here is the multigenre workshop at advanced-undergraduate and graduate levels. I want to suggest its function, value, and structural challenges.

Most graduate writing programs require students to participate in one or two workshops in "another" genre, that is, in a genre other than the one for which they were admitted to the program. I think this is a well-meaning policy, though I also have witnessed the problems that such a requirement may cause. A student burning to compose the next great generation-specific, blockbuster screenplay and/or novel (*The Big Chill* with cell phones) may find himself or herself staring into a George-Oppen-inspired text and feel as though she has been teleported to another dimension; and of course she has been, and that is a good thing. But to get to the Objectivist poetics from which Oppen-esque poems blossom takes much more reading and contemplation than such a student will ever, in the vast majority of cases, invest, and alienation is often the result of such classroom encounters. Of course there is the question of how such a student, who has never had much interest in writing verse, composes the stuff. On what example does she or he proceed? Student poets may bridle at the untutored fiction writers who themselves may resent that poets find it much easier to integrate into fiction workshops than they into poetry workshops if only because... poetry is just weird, and given how different the audiences for poetry, fiction, and nonfiction can be, the ambitions that each reasonably, and often quite unreasonably, fosters may create a circumstance in which fiction and creative nonfiction are on one end of the pitch, and poetry the other. Fiction and nonfiction writers may dream of thousands, even millions of readers; very, very few poets may. That *almost* all fiction and creative nonfiction prose writers, if they are lucky and good, achieve coterie audiences similar to poets' is beside the point. They may *aspire* to vastly larger audiences than any sane poet (*uh-hum*) ever should.

A good workshop is often the best audience its members will ever have, even after they have achieved success, however that's measured. It is only natural that writing communities—students in writing programs as well as folks unaffiliated with local colleges or universities, many of whom are graduates of those institutions and have found livelihoods locally—divide along genre lines, form loose packs. Of course, there is always fellowship and rich and complex relations within those communities that flows between genre groups, but self-identified poets, no matter what successes they may achieve as writers of fiction or memoir or personal essays, will usually be viewed as poets who write fiction or memoir or personal essays, though there are notable exceptions of writers who began successful careers as poets and are now identified primarily as prose writers. Philip Lopate comes to mind, and Mary Karr, Patricia Hampl, Stuart Dybek, Margaret Atwood, Denis Johnson, Steven Dobyns, Rodger Kamenetz... well, the list is quite formidable. Even this short version is revealing. Few people who have read Lopate's groundbreaking anthology or his own superb essays will know that he began his career as a poet. Because their identities as poets are embedded in their critically acclaimed memoirs, most readers of Hampl's and Karr's prose will be at least vaguely aware that they are poets, that their writing lives began in verse (in Hampl's case, also journalism), but that fact will seem wholly incidental. Before I even knew that Stuart Dybek wrote short stories, I read his 1980 University of Pittsburgh Press poetry collection *Brass Knuckles* and was deeply moved and influenced by it. Atwood is such a transcendent figure that most of her readers will know that she is a poet, though I bet only a small percentage of those who read *The Handmaid's Tale*, say, will have read a single one of her poems unless it happened to have appeared in the *New Yorker*. Denis Johnson's *The Incognito Lounge* was wildly influential for many poets in my age group, but, again, my guess is that relatively few who were dazzled by *Jesus' Son* will have read the poetry collection. Steven Dobyns's career is bifurcated between readers of his crime novels and followers of his verse. Rodger Kamenetz's bestselling *The Jew in the Lotus* found an audience most of whom simply will not care that he is an accomplished poet. Everyone will have his or her own list of such writers, but how many successful fiction writers or memoirists or essayists take up poetry *after* establishing careers as prose writers? Robert Penn Warren and James Dickey were well-established poets before they published their classic novels, but, again, who has begun a successful career as a prose writer and then turned to verse? Thomas Hardy's career seems to have followed such a path, but the truth is he always saw himself as a poet first, and Hemingway's verse is notable primarily for having been written by Hemingway, though one cannot help but see in his poems themes and sentiments that shimmer in his famous prose. My point here is simply that poetry, within creative writing as in the actual careers of so many important writers, is both primary and primal. Writing programs offering multigenre workshops will not only encourage a deeper consideration of the richly complex relations between the genres, but also regarding the very idea of fiction and nonfiction, whether verse or prose, how incredibly complex that dichotomy is. Simply by herding self-identified poets, fiction writers, nonfiction writers, playwrights, and screenwriters into the same room we encourage them to feel along the contours of their ignorance regarding the other genres, and we encourage them as well to note the common features all forms of creative writing share. We also, I believe, focus them on the historical fact that all creative writing is born of poetry, and it is as important for aspiring poets to consider this as it is for the others. Most importantly, I think, is that such a genre-diverse group, by its very existence, encourages advanced students to try their hands at working in other genres primarily because, unlike in a genre-specific workshop in a genre other than the one in which a student primarily works, the student is not (or should not be) *forced* to work in another genre; she may submit for critique in her primary genre the entire semester while immersed in a comparison/contrast conversation centered on genre, a discourse that will be very different, both refreshingly and discomfortingly so, one would hope, than what she is used to. But she should also feel empowered to step out of her proverbial comfort zone and work in other genres. Needless to say, the multigenre workshop can be a boon to students desiring to work in more than one genre.

The differences between a system in which all students are compelled to take at least one multigenre workshop and a system in which students are compelled to take one or more genre-specific workshops outside their primary genres are significant. In the latter case, the emphasis is upon a student submitting to the ethos of another community; in the latter, she is welcomed into an all-inclusive community in which no one, by definition, may be "othered." She will reenter her genre-specific workshops, one may hope, wiser for having experienced what the great modernist writers experienced, as Pound and Stein mentored Hemingway, and he, to some extent, them, and Eliot, in the midst of *He Do the Police in Different Voices* (before Pound mercifully changed the title to *The Waste Land)*, despaired upon reading chapters of *Ulysses* that Joyce had beaten him to the modernizing punch. All writers must be voracious readers, and the best writers are usually the best readers and do not restrict themselves to reading in the genre to which they have given their hearts. Cross-fertilization has been a key feature of the apprenticeships of most of the transcendent careers of which I am aware. Indeed, intense reading *outside* the genre in which one is intending to work has been reported as an important feature of writers' preparatory rituals. I recently read about how Annie Dillard, a couple of decades ago, isolated in a seaside cabin and wrestling with a particularly formidable project, read little more than Conrad Aiken's verse for the duration; she was soothed by the pretty sounds wrenched, she tongue-in-cheek judged, wholly from any sense. Much better writers than I may devour novels while composing novels, poetry while composing poetry, but how many of us, no matter our places in the Great Pecking Order, simply cannot read in the genre we are working in at any given time? The reason for this may be partly psychological, partly superstitious, but the fact is that the best writers have always derived inspiration and succor from reading outside their primary genres. Too often, young fiction writers may dream of turning their novels into screenplays, and indeed are aficionados of film and popular culture generally, but are untutored regarding poetry and the history of ideas that determine it. Serious young poets (and Lord knows there are oodles of exceptions to this) tend to be better read in philosophy, in the history of ideas generally, simply because to understand much of what is called poetry one must know something about the ideas and values that underpin the poetics from which any poem sprouts. In a multigenre workshop, one in which a fiction writer need not feel pressure to compose verse, that Oppen-esque text mentioned earlier will seem no less inscrutable, but perhaps more an object of curiosity given the less alienating environment in which she is discovering it. Perhaps she will at least google "objectivist poetry." Serious student poets must learn to read the constellation of "schools" and the poetics engendering them. They must understand the difference between the New York School and, say, the Black Mountain; the common ground between the Beats and the Confessional poets; the enmity between Academic poets and everyone composing in free verse. A student prose fiction or nonfiction writer, who witnesses or gets drawn into conversations determined by such historical and ideational distinctions, may find them edifying, even useful. The fact is that the best fiction writers are aware that prose fiction and nonfiction, no less so than verse, grows out of poetics, though the world of fiction writers is less tribal than that of poets; however, that is an entirely other issue.

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Lately I have wondered why the distinction between fiction and nonfiction should apply to prose-writing workshops and not to poetry. As someone who publishes books of poetry, fiction, and memoir, I am deeply concerned, no matter which genre I work in at any given time, with the sliding scale of fact/fancy, and by this I refer to both the quantity of autobiographical information that transfers from "real life" to a prose or verse narrative (no matter how naturalistic or fantastic), as well as to such mushier matters as to what bearing that scale has upon moral judgments and emotional honesty. And I cannot help but transport those concerns into the classroom.

I respect ultra-self-referential or nonreferential texts that are grounded in radical social agendas (what was once called L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, for example). I love the communities from which they issue. When students, over the years, have submitted texts for workshop scrutiny of the type that we usually refer to as "experimental," I have tried mightily to take those texts on their own terms rather than bend students back toward referential, more or less realistic storytelling, in prose or in verse. But experimental writing is a whole other kettle of psychedelic fish, and I am not much concerned with it in this discussion, except to note that such writing usually obliterates genre distinctions. Suffice it to say that I have tried to keep abreast of the range of poetics from which experimental writing emerges, and I have tried to keep abreast as well of what I'm told are good examples of it, primarily for the sake of guiding students, as best I can, whose predilections are to read and write such texts. I am most concerned here with narratives that may disrupt habitual linearity or habitual renderings of temporality (most Modernist classics, from *Finnegan's Wake* to *Nightwood*, and the multitude that issues from them), but for which a beginning, middle, and end are at least suggested.

In fiction, nonfiction, playwriting, screenwriting, and poetry workshops, both undergraduate and graduate, one of our teaching tasks is to monitor the protean relation between experience and how it gets warped toward, oh, let's call it "universal truth." Even "genre" prose fiction may contain elements of autobiography, though it is usually utterly disguised by the formal trappings by which sci-fi, crime, historical, or romance writing is determined. More pertinent to my concerns here are prose and verse *fictions of place* that resonate for workshop members who also come from that place, such that classroom conversations will include the sharing of anecdotes that track the "fictional" narrative. For example, a significant number of Michiganders have an I-killed-a-deer-with-my-car-at-night story, or a my-father-got-laid-off-at-the-plant-and-abused-alcohol-and-drugs story. Student critics, in classroom discussions, relating their own versions of such templates may do so in the spirit of praising a peer's success, or suggesting correction or modification. Perhaps in "real life" the deer was a yearling, and in the written narrative it is a sixteen-point buck. Perhaps in reality the deer was killed instantly, and in the story it suffered until the protagonist did something extraordinary to end the suffering, or it ascended, shimmering, into Deer Heaven (the supernatural is grounded, like all else, in the quotidian). Perhaps it was a beloved uncle, not father, who lost a job and spiraled into self-destructive behavior. In other words, it is often a deeper exploration of the proto-narrative, the real-life story, that best serves our helping a student tease the "universal truth," *the sense of authenticity*, from the fictional narrative, whether it is rooted in realism, or veers, say, into magic realism, though it should be noted that in verse narratives, let's call them anecdotal lyrics (acknowledging the successes of long narrative poems, such as Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover*, that are exceptions), there is almost always an assumption that the narrative is nonfiction. The multigenre workshop shatters this assumption for prose writers as well as poets, and in the midst of the shards of that false assumption students may begin to grasp the subtlety, the delicacy, even, of the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, and that often speaking over, if you will, the verse or prose text in question and peering deeper into the ur-text, the verbal anecdote, querying not the written text under scrutiny but the experience that occasioned it, we may often tease out what is most important, what indeed authenticates the story, whether it is true or fabricated (and to what degree), prose or verse or script.

The convention of the student writer remaining silent during classroom critique, when it even excludes a student from having a final word or asking questions of the group, is profoundly wrong. An important aspect of the critiquing process should be a querying of the writer (and I am sure I'm preaching mostly to the choir here). The instructor should, when she intuits—by clues in the student's text, by reading facial expressions and body language, by knowing the student's workshop history, by knowing at least a sliver of the student's life story and the socioeconomic story of the student's urban, suburban, or rural place of origin—a relevant connection between life experience and a student text, attempt to assist the student in reconciling the two. All I'm really calling for here is recognition of the voodoo we all do when we *feel* a connection between life and text, flesh and words in the midst of a classroom critique, or manuscript conference. This mushy-gushy, seat-of-the-pants, wholly intuitive, impossible-to-accurately-chart process becomes even more salient in the multigenre workshop where, not genre-clan identity, but the fact of literary ambition and delight in making are what stitch all the personalities in the room together.

The attitude, I think, of most experiential poets is that one may *fudge* details in a verse narrative that in prose would force consideration of whether a narrative should be labeled nonfiction or fiction. All prose fiction writers fudge on a sliding scale, but unabashedly. Nonfiction prose writers invariably fudge, but usually within stylistic parameters, or relative to conventions that developed more or less organically as memoir ascended in the literary marketplace and, relatively recently, within the cottage industry of creative writing. I'm thinking of Frank McCourt witnessing his own conception, Mary Karr recalling rather voluminous swaths of childhood conversation, and all memoirists, actually, editing "real life" no less prodigiously than prose fiction writers. McCourt winks at us, and we are charmed; Karr winks at us, and we are charmed. But it is the prose memoirist who does not wink, who fails to charm us with the subtle, and humble, admission that real life has been fudged just a little bit, who brings hell's fire upon his or her head; that is, she is accused of writing fiction!

I find it only a little odd that prose fiction writers who tell stories from experience, fudging no more than most good prose memoirists, are never accused of writing nonfiction! Of course there is a neon-lit gray zone between the traditional autobiographical novel and contemporary memoir. What would Henry Miller have called *Tropic of Cancer* if he had written it, say, in early-'90s Prague—fiction or nonfiction? Just what **is** *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*? "Gonzo journalism" is a joke, not an answer. Just what **is** *On the Road?* Just what **is** *A Moveable Feast* (given how much self-aggrandizement gushes throughout)? The list is overwhelming. Just how creative does creative nonfiction have to be until it balances on the precipice of fiction? This is well-worn rhetorical ground that, I submit, gets de-familiarized in the discourse of the multigenre workshop if only by virtue of the fact that genre difference, the shifting sands along the borders, the shifting borders beneath the sands, is a constant concern, is never *not* an aspect of the workshop conversation.

Politics is the art of lying: Jonathan Swift and so many others, including Groucho Marx, explored this sentiment. Art is the politics of lying: see Plato, Aristotle, et al. "Truth is beauty, beauty truth." But the power relation of fact to fancy within literary art traverses genre distinctions with a subtlety we rarely acknowledge. The "fiction"/"nonfiction," or, even more delightfully vexing, "fiction"/"creative nonfiction" dichotomy is usually treated as an absolute, though everyone knows that there are innumerable gradations between the two. Fact, no less than fancy, shatters into a million little pieces for which even Oprah cannot account.

Let me get really, really practical here: the multigenre workshop should always be the exception, not the rule. The fact of its existence will affect genre-specific workshops positively, but it will always be barely manageable, given that its composition will almost always be unwieldy. How does one manage a self-identified class of nine fiction writers, one poet, and two nonfiction writers, say? Extrapolate from that. And who is "qualified" to manage permutations of such a class? For me, the most challenging aspect of teaching workshops is time management relative to the goal of giving each student his or her props. But the ghastly fact is that prose workshops are more labor-intensive than poetry workshops simply because editing a thirty-page novel chapter usually takes longer than editing, say, a sonnet, and the subsequent classroom discussion will likewise be more extensive. Indeed, coordinating class discussion in a multigenre workshop is much more challenging than in a genre-specific one, but when successful the result can be, in my experience, quite spectacular. The doors of three (or four or five) intimately related modes of expression are blown off their hinges, and a free-flowing commerce of ideas regarding style, structure, audience, and the future of it all ensues.

Who, indeed, *is* qualified to teach such a course? To my mind, parsing who has published well and broadly enough is silly. Most good poets I know are good prose writers, too, and if they've never written novels, they've certainly read a slew. Most of the good writers I know across the genres are solid generalists and intellectuals; they've thought deeply about genre difference in the present and the evolution of genres through history. Where departments can afford it, having multigenre workshops team-taught—a poet and a short-story writer, say, or a creative writer of any sort and a literary theorist—may yield terrific results. Or is even to suggest such a thing anathema?

In the multigenre workshop, we ask questions we usually do not think to ask in fiction, nonfiction, and poetry workshops: We ask, Why is this a poem? Why is this a short story? Why is this memoir, or personal essay? We ask, perhaps, if something *actually* happened. When a student turns in a "short-short," "flash fiction," or whatever it is called that week, we ask why it is fiction at all and not a prose poem. We may even dare to ask if a personal essay or memoir might not work better as a short story, or vice versa. Of course such questions may be asked in single-genre workshops, but from my experience not as often and not as intently.

And in departments strapped for resources, as most are these days, a multigenre workshop may ensure that students who are interested in writing creative nonfiction, for example, are honored, are addressed, even though there may be too few of them to justify offering a creative nonfiction workshop every semester.

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Lest I be placed in the stocks, or worse, for the heresy I have expressed here, let me reiterate that the multigenre workshop should be the exception and not the rule, and let me end by noting that I have indeed taught such workshops that accommodated plays and screenplays, and though inclusion of scripts in the multigenre mix rendered those classes even more unwieldy, it was giddy, delightful unwieldiness. For example, conversations centered on verisimilitude in dialogue, across the genres, were spirited and deeply informative, and all poets, prose fiction writers, prose nonfiction writers, playwrights, and screenwriters have at least one thing in common: we are all hams, even the shy ones among us, and delight in class readings of scripts.

Above all, the multigenre workshop can be an attitude-broadening touchstone for serious students of creative writing, no matter the genre to which each has affixed her or his primary affections.

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