

School of Unlikeness:
The Creative Writing Workshop and American Poetry

Sarah Cohen

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2012

Reading Committee:

Brian Reed, Chair
Jeanne Heuving
Jessica Burstein

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

English

University of Washington

Abstract

School of Unlikeness:
American Poetry and the Creative Writing Workshop

Sarah Cohen

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Associate Professor Brian Reed
English

This dissertation is a study of the creative writing workshop as a shaping institution of American poetry in the twentieth century. It takes as its starting point the observation that in the postwar period the rise of academic creative writing programs introduced profound material changes into the lives of American poets, as poetry became professionalized within the larger institution of the university. It goes on to argue that poets responded to these changes in ways that are directly legible in their work, producing a variety of poetic interrogations of the cultural and psychological effects of the reflexive professional self-fashioning that became, partially through the workshop, the condition of modern literary life. In other words, as poets became students and teachers, their classroom and career experiences occasioned new kinds of explorations of identity, performance, vocation, authority, and the cultural status of poets and poetry. The cluster of concerns linked to the evolving institution of "creative writing" shows stylistically diverse works to be united, and also resonates with and helps to clarify the major debates within the poetry world over the past decades between the camps of the "mainstream" and the "avant-

garde" or, as Robert Lowell put it in 1959, "the cooked and the raw." My dissertation examines a variety of iterations of the relationship between workshop culture and poetic production through case studies of the poets Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Theodore Roethke, Richard Hugo, and Jorie Graham.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface: The School of Unlikeness	1
Chapter One: Poets are Not Made in School: Assessing the Workshop and its Contradictions	7
Chapter Two: Raw Poems in Cooked Classrooms: Robert Lowell and the Poetics of Vocational Self-Fashioning	50
Chapter Three: Tone-Deaf and Unteachable: Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Women in the Midcentury Workshop	101
Chapter Four: The Daily Business of Revelation: Theodore Roethke's and Richard Hugo's Pedagogical Poetics	146
Chapter Five: Ravel and Unravel: Jorie Graham and the Charisma of Routinization	195
Bibliography	235

Preface: The School of Unlikeness

When first I knew Thee, Thou didst lift me up so that I might see that there was something to see, but that I was not yet the man to see it. . . . I knew that I was far from Thee in the region of unlikeness, as if I heard Thy voice from on high: I am the food of grown men: grow and you shall eat Me.

—Augustine, *Confessions*¹

The two poets who bookend this study, Robert Lowell and Jorie Graham, both use the same phrase from Augustine’s *Confessions* to provide the title of a book of poems. The phrase, *regio dissimilitudinis* in the original, means land or region of unlikeness, a place where, according to Augustine, the soul wanders, estranged from God. In this land, spiritual exile means not only separation from God, but also from the ability to discern “likeness”—to make meaning. Without this meaning-making ability, Augustine’s phrase suggests, nothing can be grasped or understood; in a land of pure singularity, there is only confusion and distress. It is not surprising that Augustine’s phrase would be an evocative one for poets attempting to create meaningful poetic expression amidst the radical dislocations of the second half of the twentieth century. Estranged from nation and culture by war and social change and estranged from the self and from language by psychology and philosophy, postwar American poets have often seemed to themselves and to critics to be wandering, like Augustine, in a land where old ways of making meaning—“likeness”—have dissolved, leaving only fog. “What is the purpose of poetry, friend?” the title poem of Graham’s 1991 *Region of Unlikeness* aptly inquires, for in the *regio dissimilitudinis* no such purpose—expression, communication, beauty, truth—seems sure and stable.

While Lowell and Graham may have wandered in imagination in a realm of estrangement and uncertainty, however, they spent much of their actual time, and formulated many of their

ideas about the “purpose of poetry,” in a world that seems the opposite of the *regio dissimilitudinis*: the professionalized, bureaucratized postwar university. As professors of poetry, Lowell and Graham and a host of their contemporaries have spent their careers not in any literal scene of disconnection but in a land of classrooms and chalk, of office hours, faculty meetings, and grade sheets, where they have provided instruction in creative writing and professionally embodied the role of “poet.” But while the university as an educational and research institution may seem to specialize in the identification and dissemination of meanings—of “likenesses”—the creative writing classroom is in many ways a *regio dissimilitudinis*. Unpredictable, irrational, and, for practical purposes, useless, “creative writing” is at odds with its professional and bureaucratic setting; it purports to turn creativity into a curriculum and self-expression into a group activity. Furthermore, as poets have actually enacted it, the poetry workshop, creative writing’s central pedagogical instrument, is a scene of education in which the value of all instruction is continually questioned, and in which acts of discernment are attempted against a persistent recognition that poetic judgment is a matter of utter subjectivity. “You’ll never be a poet,” Richard Hugo begins in his classic workshop textbook *The Triggering Town*, for example, “until you realize that everything I say . . . is wrong.”² “Unlikeness” is the condition of the workshop not only because of its dissimilarity to its university setting or its openness to a pedagogy of contradictions, however, but because as participants attempt to reach a consensus of judgment (or even as an instructor imposes such consensus) the workshop allows poets to register the struggle of meaning-making; signification takes on an actively dialectical relationship with incommunicability and meaning becomes a process rather than a fixed point. Borrowing Augustine’s term, the workshop is an institution of paradoxes, a “school of unlikeness.”

“School of unlikeness” is also an apt descriptor for the poetry workshop because Augustine’s topic is, ultimately, education. “I am the food of grown men; grow, and you shall eat Me,” God tells the troubled young seeker. Passage out of the land of unlikeness, then, can be gained over time—can be learned. Spiritual communion—or poetic inspiration—is not innate and predetermined, but a matter of maturity; a phase of apprenticeship in which one can only begin to “see that there [is] something to see” must be traversed, with guidance from a voice “on high.” Furthermore, the narrative of this spiritual and intellectual journey is for Augustine himself the stuff of writerly material. As workshop poetry coincided historically and biographically with the genre of personal lyrics termed the Confessional, it is perhaps intriguing to consider Augustine’s *regio dissimilitudinis* in the *Confessions* as an antecedent of the stories of individual disorientation around which many workshop poets have structured their work.

“Unlikeness” is also a rich term for the poetry workshop because while for Augustine it may be a purely negative state of mind, it is for the workshop a source of strength as well as of weakness. As a comparative term unmoored from context, it connotes not only a discomfiting inability to make connections but also a transformative ability to create new realities where none existed previously. “Unlikeness” speaks to a valorizing *sui generis* understanding of creativity, one that may be at odds with most of the practices of the university but that can also be seen as in step with its progressive values of intellectual invention and social mobility. In this sense, it helps to illuminate the ambivalences with which university study and teaching have presented poets. As they have worked within the “school of unlikeness,” these mixed feelings and paradoxes have been a fruitful source of poetic invention and engagement.

Chapter one, “Poets Are Not Made In School,” begins to give specific shape to these ambivalences and paradoxes. Tracing the history of the workshop, it suggests that questions and

debates about the nature of poetic meaning and value were already being contested during the late-nineteenth-century origins of academic “creative writing.” Poets’ theorizations of the workshop from the 1950s to the present day also detail the way that the workshop can serve as a locus for larger debates about the nature of literary authority, poetic vocation, and the relationship between a poem, its author, and its readers. The chapter argues that for twentieth-century poets, engagement with these debates through the workshop can be an important step to forming a poetic identity. Furthermore, the very plurality and democracy that the workshop format, at its best, encodes can help poets think toward a mode of writing that engages the epistemological complexity of postmodern thought.

In chapter two, “Raw Poetry in Cooked Classrooms,” debates about the workshop coalesce around an individual figure and body of work. The chapter argues that Robert Lowell should be seen as an exemplary figure of early workshop culture and a bridge between the heroic poetics of high modernism and what Mark McGurl calls “the program era.” In Lowell’s influential work, particularly his “breakthrough” volume *Life Studies*, the experience of the workshop is transmuted into a larger examination of modern vocational identity. Workshop self-fashioning, for Lowell, occasions a worry that charismatic power and individual subjectivity are products of institutional position. As a poet-professor in an increasingly routinized poetic culture, Lowell dramatizes in his poems the emotional effects of the incorporation of individual subjectivity into professional identity.

While for Lowell the increasing professionalization of poetry through the workshop is distressing—if productively so from an artistic point of view—for his students Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton the consequences are more mixed. Chapter three, “Tone-deaf and Unteachable,” argues that both Plath and Sexton successfully used the workshop as a positive means of access

and legitimacy as female authors. At the same time, the workshop allowed them contact with a masculine poetic establishment and tradition against the backdrop of which they formed a specifically feminine poetics that pointed to alternative sources of power and identity. For Plath and Sexton, then, both acceptance and rejection of the workshop were useful acts of poetic self-fashioning connected to their work's reflexivity and exploration of questions of identity. The complex and dynamic relationship both poets had with the institutions of literary professionalism thus constitutes an important aspect of their careers.

As "creative writing" was becoming, at midcentury, a national phenomenon, poets outside of the Northeastern literary mainstream were developing new ways to incorporate the workshop into poetic self-fashioning and the writing process. "The Daily Business of Revelation," chapter four, shows that in the Pacific Northwest Theodore Roethke and his student Richard Hugo developed a pedagogy that posited workshop teaching as continuous with poetic production. Roethke's and Hugo's teaching allowed them to imagine and instantiate a public for poetry within their own classrooms and campus communities, and also to use the act of instruction and the specifics of lessons as direct inspiration for their writing. Teaching into the 1980s, Richard Hugo also represents a move away from Roethke's self-fashioning based on exceptionalism to offer a horizontal vision of poetic community created through the workshop-developed ties between readers and writers.

Chapter five, "Ravel and Unravel," traces the development of the workshop to the present day through the figure of Jorie Graham. Like Lowell in the midcentury generation, the chapter argues, Graham represents a workshop "star" and a lightning rod for both approval and condemnation of the institutions of literary academia. While Graham is often praised for her impersonal, philosophical, and "unworkshoplike" poems, her work does in fact reflect the

reflexivity and concern with the socially mediated nature of lyric subjectivity that characterizes the “workshop tradition.” The procedures of the workshop are also built into Graham’s poems’ process-oriented aesthetic and suspicion of artistic closure; rather than creating perfect artifacts, Graham articulates and writes toward the ambition of a continual forward motion that creates in her most enthusiastic readers a strong narrative interest in her artistic process itself.

As each of these poets has grappled with the practices of daily life within the workshop, as well as with the existential questions the workshop occasions, the result of the encounter between individual and institution has been different. The very diversity of these workshop responses helps to show that neither the “school of unlikeness” nor its products are homogenous or monolithic. For a great number of poets, however, a common ground remains: the workshop provides the setting not only for their material and professional lives but also for the most vital point of encounter between poetry and the world. What happens during and through this encounter is the subject of this study.

¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Francis Joseph Sheed (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2006), 129.

² Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), 3.

1

Poets are Not Made in School: Assessing the Workshop and its Contradictions

As assessments of postwar and contemporary American poetry proliferate, it is becoming increasingly clear to a broad spectrum of scholars and poets that it is time to take notice of the poetry workshop. In the decades following World War II, the “workshop,” a recognizable if imprecise designation for a cluster of practices, aesthetics, scenes, and reputations, has become, by most measures, the dominant institution of the American poetry world. Most poets have participated in workshops; many teach in them; all have been steeped in a poetic culture marked both by the products of the workshop and by debates over its merits and its meanings. The stakes of these debates go far beyond the workshop itself as a happenstance of pedagogy and encompass fundamental questions about the nature of poetry, the status of poetic authority, and the cultural significance of literature. In the era of the workshop, a recognition that poetry is enmeshed in social and institutional networks of meaning and value—even as it often claims to give expression to the most authentic individualism—has become increasingly inescapable. The argument of this project is that the consequences of this recognition are at the heart of postwar poetry across the aesthetic spectrum. As it itself threatened and as it gave a face to larger threats to enabling conceptions of lyric subjectivity and the authority and value of poems and poets, the rise of the workshop both signified and was a cause of radical changes whose marks we can read across a broad range of “the poems of our climate.”

That the specific nature of these marks is highly variable is a fundamental premise of this argument. There are as many particular responses to “workshop culture” and the broader institutionalization and professionalization of poetry it has enabled as there have been poets and readers, and it is in the nature of destabilizing developments that different individuals will accept

them to different degrees and in different ways. It is possible, then, to read opposite reactions—the entrenchments of traditionalist poets and the radicalizations of the poetic avant-garde—as engagements with the same problems and possibilities. A consideration of the workshop, in this context, can offer common ground in the so-called “poetry wars” between “mainstream” and “experimental” poets. This notion may seem paradoxical in light not only of the many rants and polemics which have seen in the workshop a ready battleground on which to contest the meaning of poetry and its cultural significance, but also of the fact that scholarly responses to the workshop have, along with responses by poets, journalists, and other critics, tended approach the workshop from one camp or the other on terms either evaluative (is it a force for good or evil?) or proscriptive (how does it need to change?). This study attempts to narrow rather than widen the sense of a gulf in the poetry world, although it is focused on poets considered mainstream, or “non-experimental,” partly because of their association with the formal institutions in which their workshop teaching took place. These poets, as I hope to show, were deeply engaged with many of the same issues that were more overtly the province and concern of postmodern experimental poets, including the destabilizations of notions of subjectivity, self-expression, and language—often through their engagements with the workshop.

This study, then, attempts to begin to sketch a picture not of what the workshop has failed to do but of what it has in fact done. In touching the lives of poets, in providing the professional and institutional context in which their writing has been produced, validated, and ultimately received by readers, and in requiring them to formalize their own practices through pedagogy, this study’s assumption is that it has effected changes legible both on a formal level and in terms of the more amorphous qualities I follow Stephen Greenblatt in placing under the rubric of textual “self-fashioning”: stance, persona, and ambition, to name a few. That these changes are

hard to track and have not always been acknowledged by the poets themselves makes them no less profound. Effects of the workshop are discernable in multiple areas: in terms of poetics, workshops, especially for their leaders, have forced poets to become literary theorists and literary historians. The pressures of pedagogy mean that even the most (sometimes willfully) naïve poet-professors have been required to formulate their own practices, to define a teachable personal canon that represents a relationship to literary tradition, and to accept a theory of poetic quality insofar as to be able to apply and explain it. These requirements have been, for almost all poet-professors, in uncomfortable tension with the idea of poetry as indefinable or in excess of definability, a tension that has given a lived and affective resonance to theoretical arguments about what literature is. In thematic terms, the newly professionalized status of the poet-professor provided a lens for many poets through which to explore the definitions of modern identity in terms of professional and institutional status, and personal writings of many poets can be considered partially a critical and engaged consideration of what becomes of the individual and the individual voice within these new structures of identity. And in terms of self-fashioning, I argue that the workshop has both forced and allowed poets the opportunity to blur the line between biographical (i.e. social and professional) and textual personas, and that their public status as teachers, academics, and “professional” poets has consequences for their assertions and explorations of lyric authority.

This chapter will contextualize the workshop both in terms of literary scholarship and according to the debates and discussions it itself has occasioned. It will bring existing scholarship on postwar poetry to bear on the workshop, particularly focusing on work that attempts to transcend the partisan rhetoric of the “poetry wars” and to situate poetry in relation to the larger culture rather than to an opposing poetic aesthetic. It will also situate the workshop in

terms of scholarship in the emerging field of institutions and literature, suggesting that an appreciation of aesthetic value can be enhanced by a greater understanding of the function of literary works and their authors within a cultural and institutional landscape. It will also survey the debates and discourses about the poetry workshop and about the academic study of creative writing in general. These arguments are important not only because they form the backdrop against which an argument about the workshop must be contextualized, but because they form the backdrop, as well, for the acts of self-fashioning performed by the poets in this study. As these debates have contested the significance of the role of “poet,” as that role has begun to encompass with increasing conformity the subordinate roles of “teacher,” “degree-holder,” and “employee,” poets themselves have been instrumental in contributing to these definitions and have, in turn, been shaped by them.

Previous Scholarship

One of the most important scholarly traditions underlying this work is the study of institutions and literature. This relatively recent field of scholarship has elaborated on the important insight that the relation between literature and its social and historical context is not merely one of reflection, but, instead, that the way literature is produced, preserved, and understood is itself a product of the social and institutional structures it inhabits. By far the most important of these institutional structures, these accounts agree, at least with reference to recent American literature, is the university. In his foundational study *Professing Literature*, Gerald Graff traces the history of the institution of the English department in American universities.¹ Based on this history, Graff concludes that the literary standards and concerns that we may think of as “natural,” and even the broad interpretive differences between schools that we tend to consider aesthetic or

ideological are in fact the specific products of a process of institutional evolution. To understand the way we make sense of literature, Graff shows, we must understand the institutional conflicts and contingencies, developed over time in an ongoing series of shifting dialectical oppositions, that provide the structure of our understanding.

John Guillory's 1993 *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* offers a sociological approach in contrast to Graff's institutional history. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, including for the concept that gives his work its title, Guillory shows that literary values arise not only out of institutional contingencies, as per Graff, but also as a means, via the university, of distributing and regulating cultural capital, defined as

linguistic capital, the means by which one attains to a socially credentialed and therefore valued speech, otherwise known as 'Standard English' . . . and *symbolic capital*, a kind of knowledge-capital whose possession can be displayed upon request and which thereby entitles its possessor to the cultural and material rewards of the well-educated person.²

Guillory's account, then, alerts us to the complex social significations of a literary education, a matter of no small concern to poets. Although this is not his focus, his analysis also suggests the wide-ranging consequence for literary works and reputations when they are implicated in the university's machine of social stratification. If the mechanism by which this machine functions is, for Guillory, the literary canon as represented in the college syllabus, then there is more at stake than might meet the eye in the teaching of contemporary poetry by poets in the context of university workshops.

Alan Golding's 1995 study *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry* shares with Guillory's book a focus on canons as the byproducts and visible manifestations of institutional influence on literature and provides an account of the complex functioning of canonicity in the field of American poetry.³ As the progression from "outlaw" to "classic"

suggests, however, Golding demonstrates that the process of canonization in American poetry is more complex than a simple process of anointment of the powerful by the powerful. Rather, Golding shows the way that dynamics of centrality and marginality, professionalism and amateurism, have functioned as powerful dialectics, with both terms exerting a pull on poets and tastemakers. The very status of obscurity can confer its own brand of cultural capital, in other words, and canons are dynamic products of specific, contingent, and often contradictory interests. In Golding's account, then, a variety of alternative canons interweave with a variety of canonizing institutions, each positing its own implicit definition of literary value and its cultural significance.

These studies have often assumed that the authors producing literature and the agents of institutional power have belonged to separate spheres, with distinct interests. The case of postwar American poetry, however, complicates the matter considerably, since the poets and the institutional actors have in many cases been the same people. The questions of canon formation and cultural capital appear in a different light when it is one's own status and reputation, and those of one's friends, at stake. Two books that shed light on this situation are Christopher Beach's *Poetic Culture: Contemporary American Poetry Between Community and Institution* and Libbie Rifkin's *Career Moves*.⁴ Both Rifkin and Beach recognize that in postwar poetic culture, the boundaries between seemingly distinct venues and modes of association and affiliation have grown porous, with individuals interacting with a variety of groups and scenes that span, sometimes variably in themselves, a wide spectrum of what could be called institutionality. Although Beach is quick to dismiss the workshop as a wasteland of political and aesthetic conservatism, he is convincing in his suggestion that accounts of poetic culture should take a complex view of the role of such literary communities—more ephemeral and personal, but

potentially more influential, groupings—as “a mediating link between individuals and institutions.”⁵ Beach also helpfully gestures, more broadly, at the need to avoid a view of poetic institutions themselves as perpetual or monolithic and instead to view them as part of a continually changing landscape of structures and alliances that serve a variety of functions.

Rifkin’s study of four avant-garde poets makes the persuasive case that literary institutions must be understood from the interested perspective of “particular, historically situated individuals,” leading her to call for the study of literary history in terms of I have followed, of “career over canon.” She eloquently explains what this form of analysis can illuminate:

the ways in which a select group of postwar American poets with ambitions to greatness conceived of and performed the task of taste-making . . . the stakes *for poets* of this form of cultural production, and . . . its effects on the literary artifacts they produced and the literary history to which they now belong.⁶

Although the objects of Rifkin’s study are poets who resisted or sought alternatives to employment and incorporation within the institution of the university, the mode of analysis she articulates is equally applicable to poets who were university professors. In both cases, poets found themselves in—or created for themselves—positions of amorphous professionalism that offered opportunities to create the tastes by which their works could be appreciated and through which their careers could be advanced. For “mainstream” as well as avant-garde poets, these dynamics were crucially influential on their work and their reception, in both intentional and unconscious ways.

Rifkin’s book is an example of what could be considered a resurgent movement of re-imagined biographical criticism that treats the lives and works of individual poets in the context of a sociological or historical treatment of literary schools and movements. Other examples, many of which have tended to focus on avant-garde movements and poets outside of the

university, include Michael Davidson's *The San Francisco Renaissance*, Daniel Kane's *All Poets Welcome* (on the New York School), and Maggie Nelson's *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions*. Langdon Hammer's *Janus-Faced Modernism*, Robert Archambeau's *Laureates and Heretics*, and Stephen Burt's *Randall Jarrell and his Age* are books that take a similar approach from a more "mainstream" aesthetic perspective. These works bridge formal and sociological readings of contemporary poetry, defining a criticism that is able to situate the aesthetic properties of poems within the complex cultural networks in which they are produced and received. They view poetry as participating in complex and unique ways in a web of phenomena including personal, cultural, textual, and institutional elements; poems neither solely constitute nor merely reflect culture, in other words, but function in various and overlapping spheres simultaneously, both embodying and commenting on these spheres in ways that are worth analyzing on literary and sociological levels. Additionally, this criticism takes as a point of departure the recognition that, given lyric poetry's foundational assumption that it records an individual voice—the poet's voice—and given the fact that the exploration and critique of this assumption must be considered integral to almost any account of twentieth century poetry, this poetry demands a revival and reimagining of biographical criticism that can negotiate in a more sophisticated way the interrelations between textual and biographical personas.

A final work that could be considered an example of this trend, though focused on fiction rather than poetry, is Mark McGurl's book on the fiction MFA, *The Program Era*. In many ways the model for the present study, McGurl's pathbreaking work argues compellingly of the creative writing program that "this enterprise is our literary history":⁷

The rise of the creative writing program stands as the most important event in postwar American literary history, and . . . paying attention to the increasingly intimate relation between literary production and the practices of higher education is the key to understanding the originality of postwar American literature. Far

from occasioning a sad decline in the quality or interest of American literature, as one so often hears, the writing program has generated a complex and evolving constellation of aesthetic problems that have been explored with tremendous energy—and at times great brilliance—by a vast range of writers who have also been students and teachers.⁸

The originality of McGurl's argument lies in the way it recasts the debates about creative writing: where critics and defenders have generally seen creative writing as a pedagogical, social, even moral, problem to be addressed through reform, McGurl has shown it to be a generator of aesthetic problems—which is to say, opportunities—that can be addressed by way of the literary imagination. The radically changing literary landscape, in other words, has demanded evolution from writers, and the aesthetic innovations this evolution has produced can be understood as complex responses to the increasing institutionalization of literature—and of life. McGurl points out that the aesthetic problems generated by the workshop are not simply a matter of authors' solipsistic obsessions with their own privileged and over-educated lives, but, instead, "resonate broadly with the concerns of serious readers everywhere, living, as they do, multiply institutionalized and indeed self-reflexive lives."⁹

Key Concepts

To describe the relationship of individual poets to the culture and institutions that surround them, and to situate poetry itself within this complex relationship, I have adopted the title term from Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, with reference as well to McGurl's similar concepts of "reflexive modernity" and "autopoetics." "Self-fashioning," as Greenblatt describes it, refers to the ongoing project of representation that constitutes one's "self" as it is externally perceived. For writers, literary texts (especially, but far from exclusively, first-person lyric poetry) are privileged among these representations, but they also co-exist with and are

determined by other manifestations of social and textual presence. As Greenblatt explains, then, “self-fashioning derives its interest precisely from the fact that it functions without regard for a sharp distinction between literature and social life.”¹⁰ Greenblatt goes on to explain that for the Renaissance texts he will analyze

we may interpret the interplay of their symbolic structures with those perceivable in the careers of their authors and in the larger social world as constituting a single, complex process of self-fashioning and, through this interpretation, come closer to understanding how literary and social identities were formed in this culture.¹¹

For writers within the system of the poetry workshop, this analysis is equally as apt as for those within the culture of the Elizabethan court: textual actions are also social and professional actions, and not only reflect but also perform within the network of meanings and associations that constitute the field as a whole. In the culture of the academic professionalization of poetry, then, the formation of a lyric persona is continuous with the formation of a professional persona, and the available modes of lyric authority are determined by a poet’s position and ambitions within the system.

McGurl connects a similar idea to social theories with the concept of “reflexive modernity,” a “multivalent social dynamic of self-observation” which he defines, quoting economist Ulrich Beck, as the “‘compulsion for the manufacture, self-design, and self-staging’ of a biography and, indeed, for the obsessive ‘reading’ of that biography even as it is being written.”¹² This idea could be seen as the inverse of Greenblatt’s self-fashioning, since it is directed inward rather than outward, but it partakes of the same indeterminacy between personal and textual self-definition, suggesting the view that personal biography is both legible and inscribable in a manner continuous with literature itself. For McGurl, this biographical reflexivity is intimately related to the textual reflexivity that he names “autopoetics” and views

as the dominant aesthetic feature of postwar fiction. McGurl draws from systems theory the intriguing suggestion that this reflexivity is “not an invitation to the abyss, but a necessary component of any system’s self-constitution.” “What this means,” he goes on to explain,

is that, in the modernist tradition, the portrait of the artist is not only an important single book and an important genre, but also a name for one of the routine operations of literary modernism. For the modernist artist, that is, the reflexive production of the ‘modern artist’—i.e., job description itself—is a large part of the job.¹³

In other words, when novels draw attention to acts of narration and authorship, to the artifice of their fictions and the conditions of their own creation, they are engaged not only in authorial self-assertion or self-referential mind games, but in a complex commentary on modernity itself. This reflexivity is, for McGurl, encoded in the analytical processes of the workshop, not only because “production of the ‘modern artist’” could be seen as the literal goal of workshop training, but also via the fiction workshop’s pedagogical focus on techniques of “point of view” that create dissonances in our assumptions about subjectivity. “Point of view,” in fiction, has an analogical resonance with the problems of the lyric subject that preoccupy postwar poetry, and McGurl’s concept of autopoetics helps to connect workshop procedure to the complex explorations of lyric subjectivity that characterize postwar poetry.

The sociology of cultural institutions is another important basis for this project, especially the work of Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu. The most enlightening concept for this study from Weber’s work is that of charisma and the process of its institutionalization. Weber defines charisma and its mechanism of efficacy, charismatic authority, in terms of political and religious leadership, but the concepts are also instructive when applied to self-producing authority of literary writing. Literature, particularly poetry, can be seen as being authorized by a form of charisma, what Weber refers to as a self-validating authority definable primarily through its

effects: charismatic leadership is that which people are willing to follow in the absence of or even against the dictates of rational qualification. It can be said that a poem, and a poet, must manifest this authority in the sense that it needs to earn its reader's attention for a form of communication that offers no useful information or other rationale for its own existence beyond the reader's continuing compulsion to keep reading. As personal charisma is defined by an ability to transcend and exceed the constraints of the everyday world, poetry is defined as language which transcends and exceeds the bounds of everyday communication. Furthermore, given that poems position themselves, in most cases, as the perceptions and formulations—if not the autobiography—of one individual sensibility, the test of charisma applies to the poet as well.

If poetry is a performance of charismatic authority, then, Weber's ideas about how this authority fares within institutions—how it becomes “routinized”—have important implications for the workshop. First of all, for Weber, charismatic authority is naturally unstable, tending always toward incorporation into the world of the everyday opposition to which is its defining feature: “in its pure form, charismatic authority may be said to exist only in the process of originating.”¹⁴ Secondly, charismatic authority is powerfully incompatible with an interest in economic stability; it is instantly, fatally diminished by the act of drawing a salary and “can only tolerate, with an attitude of complete emotional indifference, irregular, unsystematic acquisitive acts.”¹⁵ Thirdly, Weber's account of charisma and routinization is structured by a logic of generational decline: only the barest spark of charisma can survive a process of succession beyond the original leaders, and its fundamental question is, in Robert Frost's words, “what to make of a diminished thing.” Applied to the poetry workshop, each of these properties helps to suggest the shape of the aesthetic problems the workshop has presented for poets: a requirement to resist the everyday as represented by the routines of academic life, a suspicion of stable

authority, a distaste for the economic realities of professionalism, and a perpetually re-inscribed sense of generational belatedness.

Bourdieu extends Weber's economic account of charisma directly to art, further demonstrating the problems of being a salaried professional poet as he relates his idea of cultural or symbolic capital to the fields of the arts and of the university. The idea of the cultural field is itself an essential concept that Bourdieu uses to articulate the networks of institutions and hierarchies that regulate value and access in the realms of cultural activity. Within those fields, knowledge functions as "cultural capital" that positions individuals within hierarchies of social class. Though cultural capital is linked to economic capital, the relation is a complex one; as in Weber's account, privileged cultural activities are unremunerated ones and must be understood as ends in themselves, inherently valuable. Cultural capital "can only be acquired by means of a sort of withdrawal from economic necessity" and art, Bourdieu suggests, is about being "snatched, by economic power, from economic necessity."¹⁶ Treating poetry as a profession and a livelihood, then, immediately diminishes its symbolic capital.

These terms help to articulate the complex and paradoxical way that such symbolic capital signifies, a complexity that is in this case easy to perceive but difficult to describe. Though knowledge of the arts, including poetry, is generally linked to elevated social status, university study of the arts is not necessarily a net gain in cultural capital, he suggests; the highest social status is indicated by a sense that knowledge and, more subtly, taste have been acquired naturally, presumably by growing up around "cultured" people and being of the same stock oneself. Whereas "by contrast, all institutionalized learning presupposes a degree of rationalization, which leaves its mark on the relationship to the goods consumed":

Total, early, imperceptible learning, performed within the family from the earliest days of life and extended by a scholastic learning which presupposes and

completes it, differs from belated, methodical learning not so much in the depth and durability of its effects—as the ideology of cultural ‘vener’ would have it—as in the modality of the relationship to language and culture which it simultaneously tends to inculcate. It confers the self-certainty which accompanies the certainty of possessing cultural legitimacy, and the ease which is the touchstone of excellence.¹⁷

Bourdieu’s “ease which is the touchstone of excellence” resembles, in many ways, Weber’s notion of charisma, and helps to explain the complexity for poets of entering into a system of “belated, methodical learning.” It also helps to pinpoint the ambivalent status of “rationalization” in creative writing pedagogy. However, the distinctly aristocratic nature of this “ease” of artistic appreciation, in contrast to the laboriously constructed taste of the bourgeois strivers at the university, cuts both ways in American culture, with its myths of self-determination, so that the task of situating the poetry workshop precisely in these terms becomes hopelessly complex.

Bourdieu’s work on the university also helps to define these complexities further. In *Homo Academicus*, he argues that scholarship is always involved in an effort to define its field in a way that ensures its own legitimacy. Academics, he argues, must manipulate the symbolic currency of their fields in order to make and preserve their own places within them:

“Thus it is that, in a milieu which depends as much for its very reality as the university field does on the representation which its agents have of it, these agents can exploit the plurality of principles of hierarchization and the low degree of objectification of symbolic capital, in an attempt to impose their vision and modify their position inside that space, as far as their symbolic power allows, by modifying the representation which others (and they themselves) can have of their position.”¹⁸

If scholarship exhibits a “low degree of objectification of symbolic capital,” poetry, of course, has even less, and Bourdieu’s description has evocative correspondences with Greenblatt’s account of self-fashioning as a process that occurs simultaneously and interrelatedly on symbolic and material levels. This suggests that at the same time that the university threatens poets’ cultural capital as artists, it also calls upon them and creates opportunities for them to defend it

by allowing them a forum in which to affect the values and principles of the field itself. In real terms, these opportunities would be defined, foremost, by teaching itself (for Guillory the syllabus is, after all, the privileged instrument of literary tastemaking), but would also include the various platforms for metacommentary—reviews, essays, textbooks, lectures, conferences—that the authority of the professor provides, and into which the contents of the syllabus are frequently repurposed. In Bourdieu’s terms, then, the poet-professor is an exemplary “double personage,” who both creates art and mediates its economic and cultural status, with all the empowering yet discomfiting consequences that such a doubling suggests.¹⁹

Bourdieu’s account of the university field also illustrates a final important concept in his thinking, that of *misconstrual* or *misrecognition*. Bourdieu defines *misrecognition* as a socially agreed-upon and efficacious false interpretation of a collective situation. Describing the university fields of scholarship that understand themselves as producing positivist knowledge rather than socially constructed hierarchies of concepts, he writes that the functioning of the field in practice is made possible by “a *misconstrual* of the model which would explain that practice.”²⁰ This concept will be extremely useful for understanding the practices of the workshop and their ability to thrive while embodying social, aesthetic, pedagogical, and philosophical positions that are in blatant contradiction. For Bourdieu, *misrecognition* is often a negative concept, perpetuating unjust hierarchies and blinding participants in a system to their own oppression, but it also has positive, or at least creative, aspects. It is also, however, because imaginary, highly unstable, a dynamic that lends it additional explanatory power for the influence of the workshop on the writing and the self-fashioning of its participants.

Histories of the Workshop

Most histories of the workshop agree that direct antecedents of the modern creative-writing seminar and its apotheosis, the MFA program, began to appear in American higher education in the late nineteenth century and gradually expanded through the following decades. There are a number of contenders for the title of the first creative-writing workshop: some accounts cite George Cram Cook's Verse-Making Class at the University of Iowa in 1895–96, which covered:

practice in metrical composition in the fixed forms of verse such as the heroic couplet, Spenserian stanza, ode, rondeau, sonnet, ballad, and song. Analysis of the best examples of these forms in English poetry. Informal discussions of artistic questions.²¹

Also often cited is English 47 at Harvard, a playwriting course misleadingly titled “Advanced Composition,” in which, beginning in 1906, George Pierce Baker attempted “by showing the inexperienced dramatist how experienced dramatists have solved problems similar to his own, to shorten a little the time of his apprenticeship.”²² As these examples show, early courses involved different recombinations of the elements of the modern workshop (itself, of course, not monolithic) with varying resolutions of the dialectal oppositions that still continue to structure pedagogical thinking in creative writing: process versus product; technique versus self-expression; positivist authority versus pluralistic discussion; writing as educational exercise versus writing as pre-professional training. What they share is the informality and basic student-centeredness of the workshop format, which picked up on the strengthening ethos of experimentation and collaboration of the progressive movement in education. As this movement strengthened, graduate degrees in creative writing became a reality. Most accounts inaugurate the full flowering of these seeds at mid-century, with the G.I. Bill and the opening of the university in both demographic terms and in its definition of valuable knowledge.²³

D.G. Myers provides the most complete history of the creative writing workshop in his book *The Elephants Teach* (the title references Roman Jakobson's famous comment that hiring a

writer to teach creative writing would be like hiring an elephant to teach zoology). A student of Gerald Graff, Myers draws heavily on Graff's institutional history of the English department in his account of the formation of the discipline of creative writing as a product of an internal struggle of professors against the rigid historical emphasis of philological scholarship. Creative writing, Myers argues, arose as a pedagogy designed to complement philology's main disciplinary competitor, literary criticism, a way for students to learn to interpret and value literature by experiencing it from the inside. The workshop had nothing to do with supporting or training writers, according to Myers; rather "creative writing was an institutional arrangement for treating literature as if it were a continuous experience and not a mere corpus of knowledge—as if it were a living thing, as if people intended to write more of it."²⁴ This insistence on the pedagogical and critical origins of academic creative writing allows Myers to maintain an elegiac tone toward the professionalization of writing that the workshop enabled; although he acknowledges that the workshop has now become the means for a standardized credentialing procedure and career path for writers, this is because, he argues, "creative writing failed to achieve its goals."²⁵ Myers's account, then, walks a fine line between valorizing the professionalism of the critics and pedagogues who used creative writing to improve the study of literature and remaining skeptical that the professionalization of creativity itself is a good idea.

Another intriguing possible antecedent for the workshop that, like Myers's account, suggests that in its early days it was envisioned as something other than a stepping stone to a professional literary career is suggested by Stephen Wilbers in his case history *The Iowa Writers' Workshop: Origins, Emergence, and Growth*. Wilbers traces the early development of the nation's first and still preeminent writing program back to earlier literary institutions in Iowa, most importantly *Midland* magazine, the leading organ of a strong and self-conscious regional

literary movement, and a robust tradition of writers' clubs whose members shared and critiqued each other's literary efforts. While the genealogical relationship may not be as direct as his account suggests, Wilbers's observation that the formal academic workshop was first established in this cultural atmosphere is suggestive, along with, more generally, the curious fact that the country's most prestigious school for writing would be situated in the provincial Midwest, surrounded by farmland and far from the acknowledged cultural centers of the Atlantic seaboard.

That the workshop first took off in the Iowa Wilbers describes, with its flourishing cultures of amateurism and regionalism, suggests the uneasy relationship it may have had from the beginning with both institutionality and professionalism, an uneasiness that Wilbers's antecedents seem to provide a more effective means of mitigating than might have been found at, say, Harvard. The culture he describes models a vision of literary production that allows for widening access without democratizing the prestige of literary value out of existence. The room at the top remains circumscribed, while widening opportunities in the middle: writers' clubs are structured around collaboration rather than competition and allow members the satisfactions of recognition without requiring overwhelming ambition or world-changing professional success; a regional literature can be seen to supplement rather than aim to displace the established literary center. For this reason, Iowa may have provided a literary culture particularly suited to the idea that new institutions like the workshop could flourish without challenging existing professionals and institutions—could, in fact, instead enhance them, as seen in the tradition Wilbers describes of eastern establishment writers making lavish and triumphal visits to the University of Iowa. Furthermore, the antecedent institutions Wilbers discusses partake of the pleasures and values of formality and systemization without necessarily seeking to apply those values across the board,

leaving open the possibility of informal networks governing publication and other literary perks and, more importantly, of untrained genius providing the surest route to success on the page.

While creative writing was developing in response to the internal pressures of English departments and local literary cultures, as Myers and Wilbers show, established poets were also beginning to explore the possibility of a university position as a means of livelihood. While work in the field of education has always been a career option for poets in need of money, with the poet toiling away as a tutor or schoolmaster a familiar stereotype, these positions were viewed as low-level drudge work rather than perks of poetic achievement; Myers's description of Longfellow quitting his teaching job as soon as his writing success enabled it **is typical**. The first American poet to have been awarded a teaching position on the strength of his poetic production was Robert Frost, who joined the faculty of Amherst College in 1916 and held a number of positions there over the course of the rest of his life, teaching both literature classes and "Advanced Composition," the appealingly humble name under which literary writing appeared in early college catalogues. Frost's function at Amherst was understood less in terms of practical pedagogy than as providing a source of literary presence and prestige that could be absorbed by students and by the community at large by a sort of osmosis (the college took this prestige seriously; its main library is now named after him).

Another precursor poet to the full flowering of the poetry workshop period was W.H. Auden, who similarly was hired, among several faculty positions throughout his career, to bring literary prestige to a small college, teaching at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. Though Auden's teaching assignment did not directly involve his status as an active poet, this status dictated his presence and role on campus. In a 1962 retrospective for the Swarthmore alumni magazine, literary critic Monroe K. Spears captures the precision with which Auden's three-year

tenure at the college laid out the script that the self-fashioning of many later poet-professors would follow. The persona Auden fashioned—and that the campus community fashioned around him—was in the university but not of it, with a professional status requiring him to maintain the aura of the amateur, in the sense that he must model a passionate love for his subject, a love powerful enough to transcend the institutional strictures of the campus and department and function as its own creative force. Eccentricity and seriousness were the components of Auden’s persona, as they were to be for many poet professors; Spears reports that

One student observed that he looked “so English, like a thatched cottage” (Auden is said to have got a haircut promptly when this remark was reported to him); another, that he looked like the village idiot. He is reported to have worn no socks, except occasionally on his head in bad weather, and no underwear; to have used a rope for a belt, worn bedroom slippers on the street, and often entertained in bathrobe and slippers . . .²⁶

. . . and the catalogue goes on. His informality of dress was matched by iconoclasm in print; “Fellow irresponsibles, follow me,” he exhorted in an article for the school newspaper. At the same time, however Spears approvingly describes Auden as a “thoroughly traditional and conservative” teacher and adds that he “conscientiously” delivered public lectures on a variety of topics, “managing to treat each of them with wit and originality and to avoid the expected platitude”; furthermore, “he is reported to have been always impeccably dressed for such occasions.”²⁷ This account shows the degree to which, first of all, Auden’s campus presence was interpreted, like a poem, in terms of a set of productive contradictions, in this case between the constraints of communal institutional life and the free spirit of the artist; secondly, it also shows that what was subject to this rather literary interpretation was Auden’s personal presence itself. His appearance and behavior were, in other words, read as a text—a text which, properly understood, could help elucidate the nature of poetry and its relationship to our society.

Both Myers's and Wilbers's historical accounts, and the individual stories of Frost and Auden, then, implicitly alert us to the familiar tensions present in the early days of the workshop. In showing the pedagogical reasoning and justification for the early programs and the antipathy these program's founders seem to have held for the idea that they might have been providing formal training for professional poets and writers, Myers shows that this training was a threatening idea. In showing the way that Iowa literary culture modeled supplementing rather than challenging existing models and institutions of literary value, Wilbers suggests that these notions of literary value are in fact fragile and contingent. These tensions still animate the question of creative-writing training and break down into questions that poets who teach continue to pose and attempt to answer. Will the workshop produce a glut of professionals? Will this debase the value of "real" writers? Will good literary judgment be replaced by the ignorant informing the ignorant? Can it—should it—be taught?

Theorizations of Practice

An unintended and frequently unnoticed consequence of the rise of the workshop is that it has required poets who teach to be theorists—not in the High Theory sense, of course, in most cases, but rather in the sense that it has required them to formulate the general rules that govern their practices and to justify and contextualize those rules to give them explanatory power beyond their own singular cases. As teachers in workshops, poets are accountable both for answers to the fundamental theoretical questions about poetry—what makes a poem a poem? what makes a good poem good?—and for the application of those answers in a relatively consistent manner to a broad array of examples. Not all poet-professors rise to this challenge with theoretical brilliance or even with clarity and consistency, but even if a poet theorizes poorly his or her

relationship to poetry is still potentially altered through the act of theoretical self-definition that the construction and presentation of a syllabus inevitably performs. For many poets, the syllabus is too small a stage: once patterns of classroom practice have solidified, it becomes irresistible to narrate and justify them on a larger and more permanent scale. The many books and essays poets in which poets theorize about teaching are the result. In these, we can find evidence not only of admirable teaching and thoughtful reflection but also of the acts of self-fashioning that poets perform in claiming the particular authority of the pedagogue and the many contradictions and misrecognitions that destabilize the workshop, creating, to use McGurl's term, the "aesthetic problems" it has allowed poets to find the means to address in their work.

The genre I am terming "theorizations of practice" grapples with a set of questions about the nature of creativity and the limitations and hazards of the workshop with a remarkable consistency across decades, academic backgrounds, and aesthetic orientations. The remarkable similarity of this thinking suggests less a consistent intellectual lineage than the idea that these debates are resistant to closure—that engagement with them anew is foundational for generations of poets and their own acts of self-fashioning and self-definition. These essays also tend to share in common a resistance to the acts of theorization they are performing, registering significant skepticism about the viability of poetry instruction and expressing doubt about the possibility of making any useful or accurate generalizations about poetry and the creative process either in writing or in the classroom. This results in frequent appeals to a kind of mysticism, declarations of the inadequacy of pedagogical and theoretical apparatuses to do so much as touch the hem of Poesy. This tendency to throw up their hands in the face of contradictions can make poet-teachers' theorizations frustrating reading, and contributes to the stereotype that their authors are not serious intellectuals. This quality, however, is less about seriousness than about institutional

self-fashioning; poets who lead workshops have often self-consciously declined to adopt the terms and methods of their colleagues in literary scholarship, in part as a means of reinforcing the apartness and difference of their form of knowledge production.

The most significant aspect of this difference is figured implicitly and sometimes explicitly in terms of audience, with poets rejecting the scholarly conversation-among-experts in favor of a rhetorical strategy pitched toward a more general audience. In practice, this means common-sense terms and non-specialized vocabularies, no disclosure of epistemological methodologies, and contextualizations of claims in terms of previous debates and practices in only the most general, often laughably ahistorical, terms (a typical genealogy of the workshop might suggest Plato, Keats, and T.S. Eliot as involved in a coherent trajectory of instructional practices). These strategies, though they do often entail a sacrifice of theoretical rigor, encode a fundamental populist ambition that is profoundly important to most versions of the poet-professorial enterprise. Building on the populist ethos of progressive education in which the workshop got its start, the (apparent) accessibility of poet-professors' writings asserts the cultural centrality of poetry—its availability to everyone—and further suggests that the poet-professor him or herself, as explicator and mediator, is the essential instrument of this cultural centrality.

A good place to begin exploring these theorizations is the February 1952 issue of *Poetry*, an issue entitled “The Two Workshops” and devoted entirely to consideration of the institution of the writing workshop and the poetic fruits it had already begun to bear in its brief existence. The issue contains essays and a selection of poems from creative writing students at Iowa and the University of Washington and, introducing the issue, editor Karl Shapiro sets the tone for what will follow:

During the two years since *Poetry* has been under my direction, the staff has frequently remarked upon the number of poems which come to us from colleges

and universities and from the poetry workshops and summer writing conferences of America. Of the thirty thousand or so verse manuscripts sent to this office yearly, the majority—and the best of them—originate in schools where the craft of writing is taught and where the teachers are poets. Undoubtedly, the teaching of writing as an art is a major development in American education and one which may, for better or for worse, influence the whole future of American letters.²⁸

Shapiro's introduction is noteworthy first because it indicates a surprising statistic—that already by 1952, just twelve years after the Iowa Writers' Workshop was founded, the magazine whose most famous institutional affiliation had previously been, perhaps, Ezra Pound's one-man "Ezuversity," had been fully infiltrated. As Shapiro recognized, the newer institution was transforming the older one. Beyond this acknowledgement, the other noteworthy feature of Shapiro's introduction is his tone—at once open and skeptical—and his prescient prediction and pragmatic acceptance of the change the workshop would effect. Shapiro points out what are already "facts on the ground" and challenges the poetry world to acknowledge, accept, and make sense of them.

The attitude of Shapiro's brief essay is echoed by the two essays that follow by Theodore Roethke, from Washington, and Paul Engle, from Iowa, both of which are exemplary poetic and pedagogical theorizations that articulate many of the creative misrecognitions and instabilities that will continue to be common in later examples. In each of their introductory essays, Roethke in "The Teaching Poet" and Engle in "Poet and Professor Overture," the poet-professors make a series of assertions about the nature of poetry and its instruction, ideas that coalesce into a fairly distinctive set of theoretical principles, as follows: the potential of workshops is limited, but within those limits, they can provide specific benefits, namely knowledge of craft; example and encouragement; a set of readings and reading practices constituting a literary education; and a sense of connection and community. These principles suggest an underlying set of assumptions about subjectivity, creativity, expression, readership, and tradition, some in contradiction, that

have been powerful shaping forces of American poetry. They have not, however, as many critics claim, been accepted in a monolithic or unquestioned way; rather, they have been the shifting and contested ground on which poetic identities and practices have been forged. As Roethke and Engle and their successors alternate authoratative explanatory claims bearing on these assumptions with disavowals of the possibility of true “poetic” authority, they suggest the instability of these authoratative claims, and gesture at the multiplicity of perspective that, as McGurl points out, is inherent in the structure of a workshop. In other words, the essays demonstrate, even as they also describe, what could be considered the fundamental creative dilemma of postmodernity: how to build something “real” on the shifting grounds of unreality that we know language, subjectivity, and experience to be.

The first “real” property of the workshop, according to the essays, is its capacity to create community. Importantly, this aspect of the self-justification of the workshop connects to the principle of populism, and implies a horizontality that mitigates the potentially authoritarian role of the workshop leader and, more broadly, envisions a poetic culture characterized by connection and participation rather than by the elevation of a few “stars.” Engle alludes to this on the level of instructional poetics when he writes that “As important as teaching is the fact that young poets instruct each other, by plain association, by counter criticism in class, by watching the way in which each sweats out the tangles of word by word and line by line.”²⁹ He also gestures at the larger implications of the workshop, writing that “The college may give the poet a small community where he can live congenially, in the security of practicing his art as a respectable trade.” Engle’s description of the poetic community within the university suggests the complexity of the workshop’s populism; in the sense that it is a refuge for art from the rough and tumble of the culture as a whole, his university community is elitist, but in the sense that it

allows poets to practice a trade, the community he describes removes poetry from its pedestal and connects it to the workings of everyday life. Engle's statement, then, is a prescient example of a misrecognition of the workshop, in the sense that he touches on but does not acknowledge the divisions and contradictions between its elitist and populist impulses, even as he makes the case for the value of the whole.

The idea of workshop as poetic community, despite the questions it raises, has continued to be a powerful one. For instance, Arielle Greenberg, in an article for the American Academy of Poets entitled "A (Slightly Qualified) Defense of MFA Programs: Six Benefits of Graduate School," writes that "MFA programs are where you find community," continuing,

those of us with MFAs know that perhaps the bulk of our learning came from peers, the other ambitious, hard-working, talented writers in our classes. Some of us have gone on to start presses or collaborate on book projects with these peers; we help each other find jobs or readings, put each other up on couches, and support each other through rehab, divorce, or parenthood. Poets are not known as a particularly outgoing bunch—many of us are slow to trust, insular, and weird. For this reason, MFA programs can be like a stay at the infamous mental hospital McLean's, but they can also be the places we meet our best friends, our most trusted readers, our lovers, our editors, and our mates.³⁰

Greenberg's argument here is notable not only for its similarities to Engle's but also in her comingling of the personal and professional aspects of the communities that the MFA program and its workshops produce. As Greenberg suggests, following Engle's misrecognition, what could be criticized as an increasing insularity of the art among a network that is as much social as professional—with all the potential exclusions a social network invites—and that has little to do with a general reading public, can also be a vital and enabling development. In an essay entitled "In Thought a Fine Human Brow is Like the East When Troubled with the Morning," Peter Gizzi further applies this sense of connection and community to the poet-professor as well as the students, and argues rather poetically for an understanding of poetry in which this connection is

central: “I never accepted the argument that poets shouldn’t teach. I mean, where else does poetry live if not between people, faces, in a room, a stanza struggling in a condition of awakening, of annunciation really.”³¹

The second “real” benefit that theorizations of the workshop assert is that workshops provide a valuable literary education. As D.G. Myers has explained, this education was the central purpose of early creative writing classes, and it has continued to be asserted as one of the benefits of the workshop that can be justified within a limited framework, without depending on the poetic careers that its graduates might undertake. Although the method of instruction might be different from that of a traditional English classroom, both Engle and Roethke are adamant that the study of literary tradition is an essential part of their classroom practice and, implicitly, that the classroom is the right place for such study. Engle writes that,

At Iowa, we do not believe in a writing course by itself, but consider a close, analytical reading of literature, old and modern, as a solid help to a beginning writer . . . [published] poems are often taken apart in the writing class, usually because a student’s poem offers similar situations of intent or language and the established poem will help him see his own quality, or his lack of it.³²

For Roethke, who also writes extensively elsewhere about his teaching and modeling of reverence toward great works, literary education is similarly important:

Either to imitate consciously or to look at and do otherwise, I use a great body of mimeographed material and several anthologies and collected editions and the University has built special cases in the classroom so I can rum to my own books in pursuing this referential technique. There is a constant effort to remind students that poetry is a classic art and requires that its exponents read intensively in all literatures.³³

This sense that an education in creative writing is also an education in literature is also ubiquitous today, despite the criticisms that MFA students do anything but “read intensively in all literatures.” Arielle Greenberg makes this case; among the six reasons she lists for the value of the MFA, she begins with “MFA programs are where you find out what to read” and “MFA

programs are where you find out how to read.” Greenberg’s point is that the array of poetry and writing about poetry available today is so vast that the literary education provided in MFA programs, even if incidental and haphazard, is uniquely valuable for a poet.

Heather McHugh takes this point further in a letter to the editor published in *The American Scholar*, eloquently articulating the argument that the literary education provided in creative writing programs surpasses that of traditional English departments, at least as relates to the writing of poetry, because the study of literature as an end in itself has gone out of fashion in today’s English courses:

[Creative writing students] come because they yearn to bear, toward literature, the artist's affections, not the theorist's disdains. In MFA studio courses students can find the linguistic arts still prized and nourished, the shape and shine of literary language still standing a chance of being studied in scrupulous detail. They come in order to understand how what is "oft felt" can best be communicated--"ne'er so well expressed." They come to study the very classics of poetry and fiction (not the work of their teachers) that go increasingly untaught elsewhere in English departments, as theory's rubrics have displaced those of author and era. They come to study the transfiguring capacities of rhetoric, grammar, syntax, prosody--the capacities of literary language, its music and design. They come to equip themselves against jargon and polemic; to hand-feel rather than hammer their way around emotions and thoughts. They don't come to "colonize" or consolidate ideas about culture: they come to study art.³⁴

Marjorie Perloff makes the similar case that creative writing

now fills a need that English simply refuses to satisfy. I am talking about literary study, increasingly neglected as beside the point by the so-called Englit department in deference to the heady new world of Cultural Studies. Indeed, most assistant professors hired at even the top institutions like my own no longer have the slightest idea what literary analysis might entail. They've heard of an old-hat technique called "close-reading" — a technique they know they don't want to use even though they have no idea what it might accomplish.³⁵

The workshop, in other words, has potential as an educational tool beyond its potential as a training ground for future poets; it can also, these accounts suggest, not only provide a cornerstone of liberal education but also help to create future readers. In a literary climate in

which the amount of readable literature grows increasingly overwhelming, furthermore, literary education through creative writing can help a student navigate the abundance.

In addition to these relatively straightforward benefits that workshop theorizations discuss—the building of community, the provision of a literary education—there is also the stickier question of the writing instruction itself. To the perennial question “can it be taught?” both Roethke and Engle provide a cagey and nuanced answer. “Let’s say no one would claim to make poets,” Roethke writes, but Engle qualifies this with the observation that “many people believe poets are born, but they can be half-made. The creative talent cannot be created, but once it is discovered it can be shaped and nourished and matured.”³⁶ Engle begins his essay by evoking the limitations of writing workshops with a metaphor recalling his program’s agricultural setting:

Hinny- ‘a hybrid between a stallion and an ass’ (Webster). The result of the union is sterile.

Agreed—the creative force must be present or none of God’s creature can reproduce, poem or offspring.³⁷

Roethke is less colorful on the same point: “There’s no point in being grandiose about results. How many in a generation are true poets?”³⁸ In both cases, these introductory statements show the preemptive passing of the buck that is part of so much discourse about creative writing and poetry: whatever happens in the classroom, creating valuable literature is a matter of a higher force or a poet’s deeper and more essential nature, whether breeding in a literal sense, à la Engle, or the sense of being a “true poet” of one’s generation (a status neither Roethke nor Engle himself held or holds securely). These theorizations, then, are built on a hedge that is as unsatisfying as it is necessary, and which points toward the fundamental misrecognitions that power the workshop, encompassing both “poetry is teachable” and “poetry is worth teaching even though it is not teachable.” Roethke and Engle’s hedged misrecognitions are echoed by the

contemporary theorizations ubiquitous in textbooks and poetry manuals. For example, poet Mary Oliver opens her 1994 *A Poetry Handbook* with a discussion of whether and how poetry can be considered teachable:

Everyone knows that poets are born and not made in school . . . Something that is essential can't be taught: it can only be given, or earned, or formulated in a manner too mysterious to be picked apart and redesigned for the next person. . . . [But] whatever can't be taught, there is a great deal that can, and must, be learned . . . It is about the part of the poem that is a written document, as opposed to a mystical document, which of course the poem is also."³⁹

Similarly, in *The Poetry Home Repair Manual* (2007), Ted Kooser begins with the claim that “most of a poet’s education is self-education,” but continues to add that not only is it true that “a good teacher may be able to nudge you along,” but also “the craft of careful writing and meticulous revision *can* be taught.”⁴⁰

Several essays in the 2010 essay collection *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*, written for an implied audience of fellow poet-teachers rather than students, show the centrality of these contradictions to the self-definition, the self-fashioning, of contemporary poet-professors. The contradictions and necessary misrecognitions of the poetry classroom, inhere, in other words, not only in the subject matter, but in the poet-teachers themselves. In the collection’s introductory essay, “March Hares and Wild Trout: Against the Domestication of Poetry,” Sarah Gridley writes:

Poet. Teacher. Do I contradict myself?

I contradict myself. I teach practical skills and reckless fancies. I know and have no clue.. .

Dylan Thomas said: “The best craftsmanship always leaves holes or gaps . . . so that something that is *not* in the poem can creep, crawl, flash, or thunder in.”

I feel the same is true in *teaching* poetry: the best class is one that is weirded out—punctured—made eccentric—by the creeping, crawling, flashing, or thundering in of something that is *not* in the classroom.⁴¹

In the same collection, Dan Beachy-Quick writes,

To teach poetry is to find oneself devoted, and convincing others to be devoted, to an art whose faith demands contradiction . . . A teacher of poetry, I have all of these qualities at once: wise-one and fool, stoic and liar, seer and lush, mnemonomaniac and aphasiac.

Other contradictions abound, and the teacher is devoted to them. The contradictions do not cancel each other; they embrace each other.

These oppositions coincide in the poet. In the classroom, the teacher is one who finds no difference between the wise-one and the fool. The teacher is both. Poetry, too, relates to wonder. Wonder is where poetry returns us to. It disables something in us that knows what to say about the world . . . The teacher stands between the particulars of the world and the generalities of the universe. The teacher of poetry is the one in whom those realms collide and maintain their livid connection.⁴²

These articulations give a sense of the creative power, as well as the instability, of the position of poet-professor, power not only directed inward toward the classroom but outward toward poetry and the world as well.

The workshop is a collection of specific practices as well as general identities, however, and despite their vigorous hedging Roethke and Engle both in fact have much to say about how talent should be “shaped and nourished and matured,” what should and does happen on the workshop’s new training ground for poets and readers. Both teachers delicately maneuver around the pedagogical paradox of teachability, asserting that a poet’s innate talent and natural development can be helped along with the right application of encouragement and nudging. Engle: “Here is the teacher’s usefulness—to find the good in a poem, however slight it might be, and to urge the young poet to thrust his verse in that direction . . . to give him the alertness to affect wisely that portion of the writing of poetry which is available to the mind at work.”⁴³ Roethke: “The problem is to seize on what is worth preserving in immature work . . . and to build it into a complete piece that has its own shape and motion.” The pedagogical mode, then, is a

hybrid between direction and encouragement, pitched not only toward nurturing unique and potentially volatile talent, providing an apprenticeship for “true poets,” but also toward providing a general education for a broader student body. To this end, the specific pedagogical strategies differ somewhat, reflecting a slightly stronger orientation toward general education for Roethke and toward the apprenticeship model for Engle: Roethke recommends exercises, Engle urges students only to strive for complete poems; Roethke is skeptical of office hours, Engle suggests that the best teaching occurs one on one.

In both cases, as well as with later formulations such as Oliver’s and Kooser’s, most workshop pedagogy depends on a kind of provisional splitting of the creative process, a division of the poem into those parts that can be influenced by teaching and those that cannot. There are different accounts of where the line falls: for Kooser, the teachable elements are craft and revision; for Oliver, as she goes on to elaborate, they consist of “matters of craft, primarily,” which her book will itemize, and also include “a lively acquaintance with [the] field and with past as well as current theories and techniques.”⁴⁴ Engle suggests that the distinction is between the conscious and unconscious minds, that it is possible to enlarge the part of the process “available to the mind at work”; Roethke postulates that “shape and motion” can be added by a teacher’s influence. This theory of divisibility is one way of describing one of the primary misrecognitions of the workshop, a vision of the structure of creativity that allows some degree of teachability while also preserving the powerful idea that poetry and poetic talent lie beyond the bounds of ordinary cognition. It leads to a second important misrecognition, which regards the authority of the poet-professor to perform this division, to stake out, both in general and, more crucially, individually, for each individual poem workshopped in class, what territory belongs to “teachability”—and how, and why—and what lies at the core that cannot be touched. It is clear

that differing decisions on this point would produce very different lessons for the class, and very different revisions from the student-poet: some workshop leaders might follow principles that lead them to attempt to leave subject matter intact but suggest radical alterations to form, while others might encourage revisions to be based on a few of the strongest lines, or even of the strongest images or sounds.

The resulting concern that the workshop leader's authority to isolate the "improvable" aspects of the poem is subjective or even arbitrary is often ventriloquized in poets' theorizations as the worry that professors will try to make their students write like them, an ambition most are quick to mention and disown. Engle assures his readers in this context that "no form or attitude must be imposed; dare the young poet to find his own"; Roethke, in a more complex formulation, cautions that "I insist that the teaching poet preserve his identity; otherwise he may not only ruin his own writing and thereby lose his effectiveness with the best students, but he will also do them another disservice: unconsciously he will begin trying to create them in his own image." Arielle Greenberg echoes this sentiment, writing that "most faculty I talk to agree with me: we have no interest in producing students whose work is a clone of our own." However, both critics of the workshop and the poets themselves who contend with these issues have a more complex objection to the nature of the authority that the workshop grants its leaders. Jennifer Moxley, expresses an idea very similar to Greenberg's, writing that "I have zero interest in convincing [my students] to write the way I do or like the writers I value," but precedes this with the admission that she has a "constitutional aversion to proselytizing."⁴⁵ This statement is telling because, while aesthetic judgment is distinct from proselytization in some ways, it requires a similar sense of conviction communicated from authority to acolyte in the absence of evidence. The traditional workshop pedagogy articulated by Roethke and Engle is based on, and readily

claims, this authority: despite the ineffability of poetry, the poet-professor can make judgments that can be granted the status —sometimes acknowledged to be provisional, sometimes not—of objectivity. What troubles critics of the workshop and, increasingly, poet-professors themselves, is not that the aesthetic orientation of the professor in question might be too rigid, or that his or her critical skills might not be adequate to the poem, but the attitude about personal and textual authority that this assumption seems to encode: a hierarchical and institutional model of personal authority and a poetics in which poems are assumed to have fully knowable, discernable, separable elements subject to absolute judgments of good and bad, right and wrong. Put more simply, poet-professors seem to be setting themselves up as oracles answerable to no one but their own internal intuitions of what is poetic, perpetuating mystery while purporting to spread knowledge, and arguing that only they are in possession of the correct understanding and interpretation of the poem.

In particular, this leads workshop pedagogy to be associated, usually implicitly, with “closed” form, a term usually used only in the negative, in contrast with the “open form” associated with the avant-garde and experimental poetics of the postwar period. In “A Rejection of Closure,” Lyn Hejinian defines a “closed text” as one in which “all elements work toward a single reading,” as opposed to an “open text,” in which “all elements are maximally excited.”⁴⁶ It is easy to see why pedagogical expediency might push workshops toward an aesthetic of closure—certainly the difficulty in producing a coherent lesson in which “all elements are maximally excited” is apparent. And poet-professors’ writings, especially early ones, do justify their pedagogical authority in terms of positivist statements of poetic quality that depend on the New Critically inflected assumption that in a successful poem “all elements work toward a single

reading.” “I am quite willing to abide by the evidence—the work done,” Roethke writes, and Engle also concludes his essay with such “evidence”:

There are poets here who were writing sentimental trash a short time ago. They are suddenly, sharply better. This is the hope and purpose of a poetry workshop. But there are still flabby lines and stanzas. We must tighten them tomorrow.⁴⁷

Both poets also describe their interventions into student writing in terms that seem to assume a single reading, a sense that the elements of the poem should be working together to achieve what might be considered a “unity.” Engle draws on this idea when he writes that the workshop leader should “probe the body of the poem for lesions that corrupt the workings of phrase, image, rhythm, tone, theme—to verify, with his limited power, whether the poem is “true” to itself.⁴⁸ As Engle’s use of quotation marks indicate he is aware, the idea of of this poetic closure, of a poem having a Platonic “itself” to be “true” to, is itself a misrecognition of the workshop, and one that could plausibly lead to an aesthetic of risk-aversion, of flat, unambitious, and mechanistic writing, of elements being minimally rather than maximally excited so that their contribution to the whole can be plausibly understood and explained as part of a unified whole. Further, this assumption of closure can be thought to be additionally damaging to innovation because of the democratic nature of the workshop; to avoid criticism by the less astute members of the class, or to please a dogmatic or unimagiantive professor, the argument goes, young poets further constrain their aesthetic choices.

There is undoubtedly some truth to this critique, but it is also an oversimplification. What these poets’ theorizations show us is that the poetry workshop, at least in its best form, has been precisely an attempt to grapple simultaneously on poetic and pedagogical levels with the very problems that Hejinian describes in terms of openness and closure. In its structural capacity to balance pluralism and consensus, on a social level, and to define notions of value in the face of

indeterminacy and subjectivity on an aesthetic one, the workshop can be a sophisticated instrument for considering the theoretical problems that have obsessed postwar literary production. In “Creative Unknowing,” her *Poets on Teaching* essay, Cole Swenson articulates this potential in listing her two principles of the workshop: “one, that a workshop should be a course in applied poetics, and two, that it’s a poetics of unknowing that forms its core,” a poetics

in which language as an act of art can be scrutinized, not in order to prescribe the proper poem, but, on the contrary, to shift the parameters of poetry away from such notions of propriety to increasingly indeterminate characteristics based on its function in the world, and yet to do so in a rigorous way that keeps indeterminacy from becoming a simple dissolve.⁴⁹

Debates

Debates about the workshop have generally centered around the problem that it is destroying literacy, discipline, originality, risk-taking, and hard work among poets and students and creating an army of careerist drones bent on churning out derivative, solipsistic work of interest only to clones of themselves. These debates, although essentializing and often tiresome (Christopher Beach titles his chapter on the subject “Discussing the Death of Poetry to Death”), are important not only insofar as their criticisms are justified but also because they have in themselves become a dominant feature of the landscape of poetic culture, one with which all teaching poets must contend. Questions about the nature of poetic ambition and poetic culture are, in this era, inevitably caught up with questions about the university and the workshop, and a sense of vulnerability to the polemical critiques commonly leveled against the workshop is a factor of self-fashioning for all participants.

Narratives of crisis are one important strand of these debates, with regularly appearing polemics arguing that the workshop is threatening poetry by, according to Donald Hall, severing

poets from tradition, authenticity, and literary rigor;⁵⁰ by, according to Dana Gioia, creating an elitist poetry subculture dedicated only to pleasing itself;⁵¹ or, according to Poetry Foundation President John Barr, depriving us of future poet-Hemingways by giving young writers a cushy academic alternative to “real” life experience.⁵² These narratives are powerful because they highlight the problems that do exist within the system of the workshop and its relation to the creative process, echoing discomforts that are also felt acutely by workshop poets themselves. The preponderance of critiques such as those above are among the reasons, paradoxically, that the misrecognitions of the workshop are so fruitful for poets, as they keep the contradictions of workshop self-fashioning at the forefront of debates and definitions about poetry.

A second strand of debates about the workshop, and a second set of critiques, comes generally from scholars and from poets associated with the poetic avant-garde: that the structural and cultural tendencies of the workshop make it aesthetically conservative in general and disconnected from the most exciting innovations of postwar poetry in particular. Summing up this critique, Charles Bernstein classes workshop poetry under the withering epithet of “official verse culture.”⁵³ Marjorie Perloff calls it “regressively romantic.”⁵⁴ Ron Silliman articulates the objection more specifically by saying that the consequence of the workshop system has been “to cleave critical thinking about the poem, particularly among academics, from the writing of the poem itself.”⁵⁵ These critiques, though still common and important, have lost some of their edge as the “poetry wars” have begun to diminish and as a wider range of aesthetic and institutional combinations have emerged, with avant-garde poetics finding a secure home in the university and workshop leaders beginning to teach “experimental” works alongside those of more mainstream traditions.

A final strand of discourse and debate surrounding the poetry workshop is the growing body of literature that is oriented toward pedagogical theory. As the preceding discussions of theorizations have shown, the poetry workshop for most of its existence has only received a scattershot and reluctant theorization. Workshop practices were developed by professors authorized to teach on the basis of their publications, most of whom had no formal pedagogical training. Moreover, as the preceding sections have shown, such formal training in pedagogy would be suspect to many poets and students, reducing the sense of the poet-professor's natural charisma which, as Weber shows, can only legitimate itself through its recipients' spontaneous inclination to follow and believe. A poet must teach "naturally," in other words, or risk what Bourdieu would term a problematic "degree of rationalization, which leaves its mark on the relationship to the goods consumed." If a poet is a trained pedagogue, further, he or she has less claim to a special status in but not of the university, a status on which the charismatic sense of transcendence must rest.

Despite all these obstacles, however, the teaching of poetry has begun to come increasingly in line with more theoretically developed pedagogical thinking, particularly in composition. The reason for this is partially the pressure of routinization or institutionalization, as Weber would describe it—as generations have succeeded each other, traditions have been increasingly systematized and subject to codification and rationalization. But the increasing rigor of creative-writing pedagogical theory has also been an unintended consequence of the structure of the MFA program. The teaching MFA students do to finance their degrees is largely within the most perennially understaffed of English department programs, composition, and those who teach as adjunct professors after their MFAs teach composition in large numbers. Many MFA students, then (and often the most promising, in programs with differential funding schemes),

spend their MFA years teaching composition, receive significant training in composition theory and best-practices, usually in the same courses and programs as academic PhD students, and, in many cases, embark on a “day job” teaching career consisting mostly of composition courses. As this situation has developed, it has been inevitable that poets would begin to apply the thinking of the highly theorized field of composition pedagogy to their workshops. In particular, this has led to an effort to create outcomes-based workshop structures and to understand and remove implicit discrimination within the dynamics of authority and subjectivity created within the classroom itself. Notable works within the growing body of scholarship on creative writing pedagogy include the writing of Wendy Bishop, including, with David Starkey, *Keywords in Creative Writing*; Stephanie Vanderslice, *Rethinking Creative Writing in Education: Programs and Practices That Work*; and a 2009 special issue of the journal *College English* devoted to creative writing, including an editorial by Gerald Graff.⁵⁶

More generally this movement initiates and speaks to a potential shift within the culture and expectations of creative writing, a diminishment of the visceral sense of *wrongness* that in some ways has powered the workshop. This shift is by no means definitive or fully accomplished, and it is worth noting that among the numerous tracts published on creative writing within a scholarly framework, none has been written by a major poet, although “major poets” who teach continue to produce a thriving genre of how-to books and textbooks on poetry writing and appreciation. If the history of the workshop is a guide, however, this is likely to change; as early creative writing workshops developed in a pedagogical context first and then began to attract poets like Frost, so too does it seem probable that the pressure to think harder and understand more about classroom practices will begin to permeate the culture of the workshop—with both gains and losses. The most dispiriting element of the vanguard of creative

writing pedagogy is the absence of a sense of literary value—a notion admittedly subjective, elitist, and historically associated with politics we should abhor, and yet, a notion without which the whole enterprise is unmoored and strangely diminished. In part, what this study attempts to suggest is how to understand the gains and losses that such changes must inevitably entail.

Notes to Chapter 1

- ¹ Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
- ² John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), ix.
- ³ Alan Golding, *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).
- ⁴ Christopher Beach, *Poetic Culture: Contemporary American Poetry Between Community and Institution* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1999); Libbie Rifkin, *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-Garde* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).
- ⁵ Beach, *Poetic Culture*, 6.
- ⁶ Rifkin, *Career Moves*, 3.
- ⁷ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), x.
- ⁸ McGurl, *The Program Era*, ix.
- ⁹ McGurl, *The Program Era*, xi.
- ¹⁰ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3.
- ¹¹ Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 6.
- ¹² McGurl, *The Program Era*, 12.
- ¹³ McGurl, *The Program Era*, 48.
- ¹⁴ Max Weber, "The Routinization of Charisma," in *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building*, S.N. Eisenstadt, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 54.
- ¹⁵ Weber, "Routinization," 53.
- ¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 54, 55.
- ¹⁷ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 66.
- ¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984), 14.
- ¹⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 167.
- ²⁰ Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, 18.
- ²¹ Quoted in Stephen Wilbers, *The Iowa Writers' Workshop: Origins, Emergence & Growth* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1980), 35.
- ²² Quoted in D.G. Myers, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996), 69.
- ²³ McGurl, *The Program Era*, provides the most astute and thorough treatment of the development of the institution of "creative writing" in America.
- ²⁴ Myers, *The Elephants Teach*, 4.
- ²⁵ Myers, *The Elephants Teach*, xiv.
- ²⁶ Monroe K. Spears, "W.H. Auden at Swarthmore," *Swarthmore College Bulletin* (March 1962): 2.
- ²⁷ Spears, "W.H. Auden," 4.

-
- ²⁸ Karl Shapiro, "Editorial Note," *Poetry* 79 no. 5 (February, 1952): 249.
- ²⁹ Paul Engle, "Poet and Professor Overture," *Poetry* 79 no. 5 (February, 1952): 268.
- ³⁰ Greenberg, Arielle. "A (Slightly Qualified) Defense of MFA Programs: Six Benefits of Graduate School." *Poets.org—Poetry, Poems, Bios & More*. n.d. <<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5894>>.
- ³¹ Peter Gizzi, "In Thought a Fine Human Brow is Like the East When Troubled with the Morning," in *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*, ed. Joshua Marie Wilkinson (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 36.
- ³² Engle, "Poet and Professor," 269.
- ³³ Theodore Roethke, "The Teaching Poet," *Poetry* 79 no. 5 (February, 1952): 252.
- ³⁴ Heather McHugh, "On Creative Writing Programs" (Letter to the Editor), *The American Scholar* 76.2 (Spring 2007): 6.
- ³⁵ Marjorie Perloff, "Amato/Fleischer Too Pessimistic (Riposte to 'Reforming Creative Writing Pedagogy')" *Electronic Book Review* (August 17, 2002). <<http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/endconstruction/carnets>>
- ³⁶ Roethke, "The Teaching Poet," 250; Engle, "Poet and Professor," 267.
- ³⁷ Engle, "Poet and Professor," 267.
- ³⁸ Roethke, "The Teaching Poet," 250.
- ³⁹ Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1994), 1.
- ⁴⁰ Ted Kooser, *The Poetry Home Repair Manual: Practical Advice for Beginning Poets* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), xi.
- ⁴¹ Sarah Gridley, "March Hares and Wild Trout," in *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*, ed. Joshua Marie Wilkinson (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 3.
- ⁴² Dan Beachy-Quick, "A Pedagogy Torments Itself with a Question That Questions Itself" in *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*, ed. Joshua Marie Wilkinson (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 85–86.
- ⁴³ Engle, "Poet and Professor," 251.
- ⁴⁴ Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*, 1.
- ⁴⁵ Jennifer Moxley, "Poundian Poetic Ambition on the Semester System," in *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*, ed. Joshua Marie Wilkinson (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 200.
- ⁴⁶ Lyn Hejinian, "A Rejection of Closure," in *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, vol 2, ed. by Jahan Ramazani, et al (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003), 368.
- ⁴⁷ Engle, "Poet and Professor," 270.
- ⁴⁸ Engle, "Poet and Professor," 268.
- ⁴⁹ Cole Swenson, "Creative Unknowing," in *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*, ed. Joshua Marie Wilkinson (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 15.
- ⁵⁰ Donald Hall, "Poetry and Ambition," originally a speech at the Associated Writing Programs Conference. *Kenyon Review* 5, no. 4 (1983), also available from *Poets.org—Poetry, Poems, Bios & More* <<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/16915>>; see also Eve Shellnut, "Notes from a Cell: Creative Writing Programs in Isolation," in *Creative Writing in America*, edited by Joseph M. Moxley (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1989); Elif Batuman, "Get a Real Degree" (Review of *The Program Era*), *London Review of Books* Vol. 32 No. 18 (September 23, 2010): 3–8. See also McGurl's response to Batuman's review, "The MFA Octopus: Four Questions about Creative

Writing,” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (May 11, 2011), <
<http://lareviewofbooks.org/article.php?id=200>>.

⁵¹ Dana Gioia, *Can Poetry Matter?* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2002); see also Joseph Epstein, “Who Killed Poetry?” *Commentary* 86 issue 2 (August 1988); Anis Shivani, “Creative Writing Programs: Is the MFA System Corrupt and Undemocratic?” *The Huffington Post*, October 23, 2010 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/anis-shivani/creative-writing-programs-corrupt_b_757653.html>.

⁵² John Barr, “American Poetry in the New Century,” *Poetry* 188 no. 5 (September 2006).

⁵³ See Charles Bernstein, *Content’s Dream* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2001).

⁵⁴ Marjorie Perloff, *Poetry On and Off the Page: Essays for Emergent Occasions* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 182.

⁵⁵ Ron Silliman, “Canons and Institutions,” in *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York: Roof Books, 1989), 158.

⁵⁶ Wendy Bishop and David Starkey, *Keywords In Creative Writing* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2006); Stephanie Vanderslice, *Rethinking Creative Writing in Education: Programs and Practices That Work* (New York: The Professional and Higher Partnership Ltd, 2011); Gerald Graff, “What We Say When We Don’t Talk About Creative Writing,” *College English* 71 no. 3 (January 2009): 271–79.

2

Raw Poems in Cooked Classrooms: Robert Lowell and the Poetics of Vocational Self-Fashioning

The previous chapter has detailed some of the ways that the setting and practices of the writing workshop can serve to generate what Mark McGurl describes as a “complex and evolving constellation of aesthetic problems” that are also aesthetic opportunities. With the rise of the workshop incorporating poets and their work into an overarching institutional and professional system, these problems have, as we have seen, taken the shape of challenges to the legitimacy and authority of poetic expression. As the workshop has led poets to recognize lyric subjectivity as determined by social and economic structures of meaning, the history of the workshop has been one of poets seeking new ways to re-imagine the value of lyric utterance when poetic authority is understood not as inherent but as the product of institutional position and the embodied performance of personality.

Robert Lowell provides an instructive case study for the history of the workshop because his poems, unlike those of many of his contemporaries and colleagues, treat these “aesthetic problems” of the post-workshop world as an explicit thematic concern. By many measures the most prominent of the midcentury poet-professors, and an early innovator in the short, personal lyrics that can be seen as prototypes of the “workshop poem,” Lowell was one of the first poets to explore as a central theme the challenges posed to charisma, authority, and even self-knowledge by modern vocational identity. Particularly in his breakthrough volume, *Life Studies*, in which a cascading series of crises of vocational identity is passed from father (and father-figure) to son, Lowell’s poems dwell on and vividly depict the consequences of a modernity in which personal identity and poetic authority are constituted by a series of institutional and

vocational negotiations. Perhaps more than that of any other poet, then, Lowell's work dramatizes the emotional and poetic stakes of workshop culture.

The Cooked and the Raw

When Robert Lowell received the National Book Award for poetry in 1960 for his collection *Life Studies*, his acceptance speech lamented that “the modern world has destroyed the intelligent poet’s audience and given him students.”¹ The speech goes on to describe a fallen, fragmented poetic culture, bifurcated into two camps based on acceptance or rejection of poetry as the province of “students”: the academics and the Beats or, in Lowell’s own terms, “the cooked and the raw,” poetry meant to be “tasted and digested by a graduate seminar” or consumed as “raw, huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience . . . dished up for midnight listeners.”

When Lowell’s speech is remembered now, fifty years later, it is usually for this formulation: the division between “the cooked and the raw” has given rise to a surprisingly durable framework for understanding American poetry and literary culture, a division between “mainstream” work aligned with institutional professionalism and “experimental” work opposed to it (a framework that has persisted even as the actual correlations between poetic aesthetics and cultural institutions have evolved beyond recognition). What is often overlooked is the surprisingly social and institutional character of Lowell’s aesthetic discussion. For Lowell, the “cooked” and “raw” scenes of reception, the classrooms and the midnight declamations, are significant not only as avenues for delivering finished poems to audiences, but also, more importantly, because they set the aesthetic parameters for the poetry itself. In the contemporary world, at least according to Lowell, poetic milieu determines poetic production, whether dainty morsels or raw gobbets, “a poetry of pedantry or a poetry of scandal.”

The brave new world Lowell describes in his speech is one in which lyric expression is self-evidently continuous with social participation and institutional self-fashioning. It is also a world in which one institution, the university, has achieved sufficient dominance that poets are defined by their incorporation into or opposition to it. In this world, poetry can no longer be public and universal. Beyond the self-limiting confines of the counterculture, the poet can no longer be a bard or sage or prophet, only a professional. For Lowell himself, this represented both an existential crisis (which left him, he says in the speech, “hanging on a question mark; I don’t know if it is a death rope or a lifeline”) and a subject of enduring fascination. Though a few years too old to have himself studied creative writing on the job-training track through poetry workshops, he was one of the first poets to be consistently employed preparing others for this career in his role as a professor of creative writing. He is also in many accounts considered to be the last poet to have plausibly achieved a truly public status on the model of modernist giants like Eliot and Pound—to have written what Robert van Hallberg calls poetry of “the center” of which the center actually took notice.² His work and career encapsulate the intense uncertainties of the brief transition period during which poetry became an academic profession, when younger poets struggled to re-imagine poetry in what was clearly going to be a new era, an era in which our understanding of every feature of poetic life and culture—community, readership, reputation, identity—would be colored by its relationship to this established and institutionalized poetry profession.

The book whose award Lowell was celebrating in the speech, *Life Studies*, can be seen as an inaugural text of the workshop era. Critics, starting with M.L. Rosenthal, agree that it represents a breakthrough: in the essay that coined the term “Confessional,” Rosenthal writes that “to build a great poem out of the predicament and horror of the lost Self has been the

recurrent effort of the most ambitious poetry of the last century,”³ an effort *Life Studies* has, in its radical way, fulfilled. In its reimagining of the possibilities of the lyric self in an institutionalized modernity, *Life Studies* represents a marked departure from the baroque, allusive style of Lowell’s own earlier work and the modernist values of impersonality and densely layered symbolic complexity it exemplifies. But it also represents the fruition of tensions inherent in these modernist aesthetics as they encountered and attempted to do justice to a culture in which expression and creativity were increasingly recognizable as acts of institutional and professional self-fashioning. As they take up this culture and its consequences, the poems of *Life Studies* and their personal and textual context can help us understand the “workshop poems” of which they are an important prototype and the literary era in which we may be still, as Lowell’s speech put it, “hanging on a question mark.”

Daddy’s Carving School: Education and Authority

Life Studies is a central text in the workshop’s early history in part because it obsessively investigates and troubles a central preoccupation of the workshop era: the relationship between vocation and identity. Lowell achieves this by staging the dilemmas of modern vocational identity through the stories of a series of father-figures, most prominently his own father. Thus the most overbearing narrative thread in *Life Studies* is the professional failure of Robert Lowell Sr., who, according to the book’s account, retired from his beloved Navy to pursue a career in business for which he has no aptitude and descended rapidly into pathetic dilettantism, living off family savings and forever recollecting his glory days as a Navy officer. The book’s longest sections, the second and fourth, tell this story, first in prose and then in a series of poems; the first and third sections also resonate with echoes. The prose section, “91 Revere Street,” was

written first, inspired, apparently, by Lowell's reminiscences during psychotherapy. It begins with a brief and seemingly inconsequential introduction of the first of many ambiguously professional paternal figures: a uniformed portrait of Lowell's ancestor, Major Mordecai Myers. "Mordecai Myers lost his glory," Lowell writes, "when I learned from my father that he was only a 'major *pro tem*.' On a civilian, even a civilian soldier, the flamboyant waistcoat was stuffy and no more marital than officers' costumes in our elementary school musicals."⁴ In this throwaway observation, Lowell encapsulates the cluster of anxieties that will animate the book as a whole, the disturbing sense that profession is intrinsic to identity but is also fundamentally inauthentic, only a costume.

A later episode in "91 Revere Street" even more fully encapsulates the issues of professional authority that obsess Lowell and connect his father's story to his own career as a professor of poetry: what seems to be a insignificant anecdote about his father's attempt to learn the skill of carving meat. Lowell recounts the way his father's friend, Commander Billy, "a stingy artist at carving who could shave General Washington off the dollar bill," would recite:

*By carving my way
I lived on my pay;
This reeward, though small,
Beats none at all . . .*

*My carving paper-thin
Can make a guinea hin [hen],
All giblets, bones, and skin,
Canteen a party of tin [ten].⁵*

This little proclamation of prowess and resourcefulness suggests the mysterious power to make something out of almost nothing that is, in a way, the dream of poetry. At the same time, it is only incidentally about the joy of successful performance. In its parodic way, it is eminently practical: carving is a means to an end, and the end is survival. Economic survival is also the true

subject of the ditty, which is, of course, not really about carving at all but is the vehicle for a humorous protest against low wages; the joke that makes it work is that carving self-evidently is not, and cannot be, a true vocation or a skill to live on.

But one of many ironies of “91 Revere Street” is that in the Lowell household it really is about carving, a preoccupation that symbolizes Lowell’s father’s dissipation and emasculation after leaving the Navy to pursue an unsuccessful career in business. Unlike the speaker of “Bilgy’s” verses, the elder Lowell does not need to protest low wages or to carve out of any economic necessity. On the contrary, as “the gentlemanly talent” according to Lowell’s mother, skill at carving suggests that the possessor exists outside a system of economic necessity entirely, and one dynamic of the scene is Lowell’s mother’s attempt to graft this aristocratic model of amateurism onto a world, and a husband, not at all suited to it. But the problem with carving is not only a marital one; it also suggests a basic instability in the relationship between vocation and identity that troubles Lowell throughout *Life Studies* and his career as a whole. If the speaker of the verses is an amateur in terms of the pleasure and spontaneity of his talent but a professional in the sense that he lives off his skill, Lowell’s father is the opposite; his skill is mediocre, uninspired, and plodding, but his performance is unremunerated and private. In these aspects, Commander Lowell’s career in carving pathetically parallels his actual civilian career as *Life Studies* documents it: work that has the appearance but none of the consequence of true professionalism in the form of a banking job for “Scudder, Stevens and Clark, Investment Advisors, / himself his only client.”⁶ From the point of view of the narrator of “91 Revere Street,” then, it is clear that “Commander Lowell” has a problem nebulously surrounding his professional identity, but, as the absurd example of carving illustrates, it is painfully unclear whether the solution to the problem is more professionalism or less.

In the carving anecdote, the pathos, frustration, and complexity of the elder Lowell's failures of professionalism are also connected to the facet of vocational identity most relevant to Lowell himself as a poet and university professor: institutionalized formal education. In contrast to "Bilgy," "that born carver," Lowell's father has sought out "among the innumerable small, specialized Boston 'colleges' an establishment known as a carving school," enrollment in which has led him to spend family dinners sitting "silent and erudite before his roast," attempting "to reproduce stroke by stroke his last carving lesson."⁷ This process of self-improvement incenses the young poet; after Bilgy's recitation, "I, furious for no immediate reason, blurted out, "Mother, how much does Grandfather Winslow have to fork up to pay for Daddy's carving school?" Despite his protestation, the immediate reason for Lowell's fury seems clear enough: the indignity of receiving formal education in what ought to be an innate talent ("that born carver"), and the further outrage of paying to exercise an ability which should at least be economically neutral or, as with the carver of verse, beneficial. Going to school to learn a "gentlemanly talent" destroys the sense of natural ease and assurance that is the basis of gentlemanly talent and the reason it is compelling. It renders the entire enterprise absurd.

Lowell's disproportionate outrage at his father's educational efforts both comically and darkly reflects the analogies between carving school and Lowell's own career as a university professor of poetry. Like carving within the world of "91 Revere Street," poetry can be seen as a display of prowess that depends for its success on an appearance of ease, self-assurance, and the expression of individual skill. It is also similarly intimate, in a sense private, and, "guinea hins" notwithstanding, not usually considered a talent to live on. Furthermore, as with the elder Lowell's teacher of carving, whom his pupil mocks as pronouncing that "'no two cuts are identical,' ergo: 'each offers original problems for the *executioner*,'"⁸ the professor of poetry-

writing makes the dubious claim that he can teach an activity whose appeal depends on its originality, individuality, and irreducibility to systems; that is, on its being fundamentally unteachable. Given all this, a college course in poetry seems almost as egregiously beside the point as a college of carving, and, like the carving-school student, the poet-professor is guilty of both over- and under-professionalization. He is overly professional in the sense that, according to popular romantic conceptions, poets should not have steady jobs, should not be members of totalizing institutions like the university, and should not subject the inspirations of the muse to the pretense of systematic pedagogy. He is, at the same time, insufficiently professional in the sense that university teaching is a soft job.⁹

These interlocking concerns—that the teaching of poetry is a debasement of the art, on the one hand, and that it is too soft and inexact to be a real profession, on the other—are not incidental to *Life Studies* but represent a central tension, and an existential struggle, within it. In this, Lowell may have been conscious of representing an era in which, as he told Frederick Seidel in 1961, “Almost all the poets of my generation, all the best ones, teach.”¹⁰ As Lowell refracts these concerns with vocational identity through the lens of his father’s career failures, he argues implicitly that his father’s unhappy and ineffective middle-age is a direct consequence of his abdication of clear vocational identity. The anxiety that underlies this argument is that in the modern, bourgeois world poetry must function within, life without a clearly defined profession is hardly living at all: “he never had a civilian career,” Lowell writes of his father, as if this fact is self-evidently disastrous, “he instead had merely twenty-two years of the civilian life.”¹¹ It is no coincidence that in *Life Studies*, in Lowell’s consistent gloss of his father’s story, vocational identity is power, and that without it one is only a “civilian,” cut off from authority and from consequence. If this is a problem for Lowell’s father it is equally so, and more urgently, for

Lowell himself, for whom the authority vested in the vocational identity of “poet” is also the authority that enables the poetry itself. For Lowell, whose own meteoric career success rouses a reflexive suspicion in many critics,¹² vocational identity is a nexus of poetic power, and a sense of the right to speak granted, or earned, by the title of “poet” undergirds his work. So career is not ancillary to poetic possibility—worldly engagement not a “day job”—but constitutive of it; the socially and professionally sanctioned role of “poet” creates the conditions that allow poetic authority. In other words, being a poet is more than writing poems, and a poetic career is a closed circle in which poetic production and personal authority infinitely create, justify, and perpetuate each other.

Lowell’s anxieties derive partly from the fact that the authority produced by this closed circle is peculiar and fragile. In Max Weber’s terms, it is charismatic authority: personal, irrational, opposed to the routine and everyday as well as to systematic reproduction and internal consistency. (Walt Whitman memorably links this charisma to poetic persona when he writes “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then . . . I contradict myself.”¹³) As Weber writes of such authority in the political sphere, the only necessary proof for charismatic authority is the willingness of followers to follow.¹⁴ This is a feature even more notable with poetic authority, since the quality, importance, and longevity of a poem or poetic reputation is determined, inevitably, by social consensus. In this view, then, the charismatic authority of the poet is the essential factor in the success of his work on every level, artistic as well as material: in order to have authority—in order to be worth any reader’s time and attention—it must appear to have authority. The paradox of charismatic authority, for Weber and for Lowell and other poets as well, is that it must appear to have this authority while eschewing the usual markers of prestige—credentials, official positions, titles, salaries—which, detracting from the personal and

exceptional aspects of the figure's allure, weaken charisma. Specifically, as with Lowell's view of carving, charisma cannot be professionalized in an economic sense, cannot be the source of a livelihood, but "can only tolerate, with an attitude of complete emotional indifference, irregular, unsystematic acquisitive acts."¹⁵

Teaching, then, threatens the charismatic authority of the poet on two levels. In the classroom, it challenges the mystical irrationality of poetry by presuming that it can be systematically taught. At the level of the poetic career, it enacts what Weber describes as "the routinization of charisma," in which charismatic authority collapses into "rational" or "traditional" authority, visionary power fading to be replaced by power based on law, custom, and established hierarchy. For a poet like Lowell, therefore, to teach is to submit his own authority to this routinization, a process Weber views as paradoxically fatal to charisma but necessary for the continuance of the original charismatic project. The authority of the individual is dispersed into a group, and the group incorporates itself into the economic and social mainstream by way of institutions. For a poet like Lowell to teach, in Weber's terms, entails endorsing an institutionalized process of "succession," meaning not only the passing of authority to the next generation but, more problematically, the conferral of this authority based on "tests and training rather than pure charisma."¹⁶ This change invariably affects not only the poet's students but also his sense of the nature of his own authority, which must be circumscribed and tamed in order to be systematically passed down. The poet's charismatic authority is also transformed by teaching because his efforts are in service of the self-perpetuating impetus of the institution itself, producing not poetry itself but more poets. And finally, a poet with a regular university paycheck gives up charismatic claims to economic indifference.

Weber's insight that charismatic authority is bound up with problems of succession also helps to explain why vocational identity is, for Lowell, a matter of paternity. As we have seen, Lowell asserts but also tests and complicates his own charisma by projecting dramas of routinization onto a series of father figures. In this, *Life Studies* anticipates Harold Bloom's thesis in *The Anxiety of Influence* that poets form themselves through agonistic Oedipal struggle with a predecessor whom the younger poet must—by means of literary imagination—subdue and supplant.¹⁷ *Life Studies* seems to bear out Bloom's claim in its third section, which consists of four imaginative engagements with literary predecessors: "Ford Madox Ford," "For George Santayana," "To Delmore Schwartz," and "Words for Hart Crane." For Lowell, however, the line between imaginary and real father-figures is not well defined. Even the literary predecessors with whom he stages agonistic struggles are not figures of the remote past, not Shakespeare or Wordsworth, but (with the exception of Hart Crane, whom he never met) his actual mentors and friends. The echoes and iterations throughout *Life Studies* also suggest that these relationships should be understood as continuous with the story of Lowell's relationship with his actual, biological father. The intergenerational transmission of literary charisma that Lowell cares about, in other words, takes place not in an abstract, imaginary literary space but at the intersection between biography and textual self-fashioning.

Recent work on Lowell's contemporaries, the poets of the New York School, suggests that these poets structured their ways of thinking about each other in terms of kinship relationships. For these poets, kinship was a productive way to imagine a sociality that could be mutually productive in poetic terms.¹⁸ Literary brotherhood, according to Andrew Epstein, "should be seen as an equivocal relation between contemporaries who simultaneously resist *and* depend on one another's texts, who fear being a mere echo and would prefer to serve as a thorn

in the other's side, and who delight in, and see the enduring necessity of, intertextual conversation and play."¹⁹ For Lowell, the dominant familial metaphor is of paternity rather than brotherhood, and the emotional register is more somber struggle than delighted play. But Epstein's point helps to explain the way in which Lowell's literary relationships, figured through kinship, work in similarly equivocal ways, both enabling and challenging his ambitions.

Pitching His Tent on the Lawn: A Student of Modernism

Lowell's emergence in *Life Studies* as a poet of vocational self-fashioning did not come out of nowhere: throughout the years leading up to *Life Studies*, Lowell's experiences show a concerted groping toward a poetics able to negotiate between the individual and the larger culture with equal responsiveness to the changing conditions of modernity and the bulwark of poetic tradition. Furthermore, Lowell's efforts can be seen as a response to fractures already implicit in the poetic modernism to which he was perhaps the most prominent heir. As he was coming of age in the American modernist era, Lowell was an attentive witness to a moment of extraordinary artistic, political, and professional ambition for poetry, watching as his idols and mentors successfully attempted to produce works of radical innovation and large-scale public significance and also to imagine and enact the democratizing and systematizing reforms that brought poetry into the university as a profession. The realization of these ambitions, however, also led to contradictions in the way the role of the poet was understood, both for the modernist poets themselves and for later generations, for whom the seamless synthesis of innovative aesthetics, public relevance, and institutional professionalism often proved to be more than a single career could comfortably contain. In a study subtitled *Janus-Faced Modernism*, Langdon Hammer describes these difficulties as an opposition between "personal rebellion versus institutional conformity," "the split personality of American culture,"²⁰ and says that for poets,

the rise of “profession formation” in the early twentieth century forced a choice between two views of the poet: the “genius,” represented for Hammer by Hart Crane, and the “poet-critic,” represented by Allen Tate. For these poets, both highly influential in Lowell’s career, these roles led to opposite impasses: extreme writer’s block and an end to poetic productivity for Tate and a suicidal leap into the Gulf of Mexico for Crane.

Though Lowell’s work and his career, in the university but not of it, are thought by some to synthesize modernism’s competing visions of poetic possibility, it would be more accurate to say, following Hammer, that Lowell’s career focuses on the problems rather than solving them. A glance at Lowell’s early career shows that he was concerned with these inherited problems of professionalism and institutional conformity embodied in the university from his first attempts to envision his poetic career. His early correspondence shows him already thinking through his own relationship to the opposition between rebellion and conformity that he perceived as a central feature of the poetic world he was arriving in. At nineteen, his eagerness to position himself professionally produced an extraordinary unsolicited letter to Ezra Pound, in which the young Lowell declares his intention to leave Harvard and come to Italy to study under Pound’s tutelage. This would not be entirely unprecedented; by the time Lowell wrote to him in 1936, Ezra Pound had been mentoring young poets through what he called “the Ezuversity.” James Laughlin, Lowell’s near-contemporary at Harvard, whose tenure at the “Ezuversity” lasted from 1934 to 1935, describes the “institution” as follows:

you could have lunch with Ezra—you paid for your own lunch, but things were very inexpensive then in Italy. You could spend the afternoon with Ezra, either taking walks, or playing tennis with him, or going rowing with him when it came to be summer. Then you could have tea with Ezra and Mrs. Pound, and you could even have dinner . . . All the while that this was going on there was this continuous monologue of information on every conceivable subject coming out of Ezra, and this is what constituted the Ezuversity.²¹

As its name indicates, the Ezuversity was a parody of the university that represented in some ways a real challenge to the institutionality of cultural transmission within the actual American university.²² It is not surprising that the young Lowell found it appealing to think of absorbing the wisdom of the great man in such casual, comradely proximity.

At the same time, Lowell's letter demonstrates an intensity that seems at odd with a program of lunches (this may partly account for the lack of enthusiasm on Pound's part for the proposal). I want "to come to Italy and work under you and forge my way into reality," Lowell writes, and then tells Pound his life story, ending with:

Last spring I began reading English poetry and writing myself. All my life I had thought of poets as the most contemptible moth so you can see how violently I was molded and bent. I was encouraged by Richard Eberhart, whom you have perhaps heard of. I spent the summer alone with a friend reading and writing. Since then I have been sucking in atmosphere, reading; and ~~writing~~ dreaming. Writing and trying to help one or two friends have been the only real things in life for me. At college I have yearned after iron and have been choked with cobwebs. I have had a good chance to read, I have gained a lot of inevitable experience; but no one here is really fighting. The courses are catalogues rather than windows.

I am enclosing a few poems as samples, you will probably think they are not enough to prove me. I pray you to take me! I can bring sufficient money to support myself, in a few year[s] I'll have to make my own living and am glad of it. I am ignorant of languages, but want to do nothing more than to learn. Your *Cantos* have re-created what I have imagined to be the blood of Homer. Again I ask you to have me. You shan't be sorry, I will bring the steel and fire, I am not theatric, and my life is sober not sensational.²³

Lowell's letter is remarkable not only for its boldness and intensity, reflective of his uniquely privileged social status as well as his youth and particular personality, but also because it shows him already grappling with definitions of literary authority and its relation to personal and vocational life. In contrast to the doctrine of Pound's own circle, ignoring any strictures of Eliotic impersonality, Lowell's letter, with its vision of the holistic benefits of attendance at the "Ezuversity," moves seamlessly between plans for art and life, already proposing the two as

indistinguishable. Equally striking, Lowell's vehement rejection of traditional education suggests that he was already thinking carefully about his future career in the role of "poet," of which actual writing would be only one component, and recognizing that a young poet of his generation would have to define himself by his career path as well as by his writing. These life and career choices, Lowell seems to suggest, would determine not only what his life would be like but also the nature of his lyric authority, what kind of poet he could be.

Although the letter rejects traditional credentials and comes out strongly on the side of the charismatic authority embodied by Pound, the mesmerizing, unpredictable expatriate, its ambivalence toward this model of authority is apparent as it posits, and clumsily attempts to synthesize, competing models of poetic vocation and literary authority. On the one hand, Lowell suggests a vision of poetic vocation in which poets are a fraternity of energetic, iconoclastic outsiders for whom poetry is a singular and mystical activity describable only through metaphor ("I will bring the steel and fire"). He also appears to try to appropriate the charisma of Pound's legendary eccentricity, including in the letter a loving exposition of his own qualities of personality and suggesting personal oddity as a shibboleth for literary talent. ("All my life I have been eccentric according to normal standards," he writes as introduction to an, indeed, eccentric catalogue of quirks.) At the same time, however, the young poet also sells himself as a potential pupil in the most educationally conventional terms, promising to work hard, study systematically, and be an obedient disciple. He also makes sure to try to impress Pound with both his pedigree and his own conventional successes and attainments. Lowell's letter, then, alternates between two affects and two associated personas: the relaxed, self-assured, charismatic young aristocrat who can't be bothered to verify the details of his ancestry ("some relation, I don't know what, to Amy Lowell"), on the one hand, and the eager young man, a camp counselor and

football player, on the other, a heartily American stereotype of optimism, industry, and ambition. His implicit assertion, which the letter invites Pound to recognize and share, is that a promising young poet should be both these types, must combine authority derived both from being and from doing, from inherent superiority and the inclination toward systematic self-improvement. Further, Lowell's letter expresses a conviction that these dual virtues will enable the education he hopes to receive from Pound and the resulting transmission of literary authority, the right "to carry your standard further into the century."

So while Lowell attempts to throw himself at Pound's feet, to define himself as Pound's natural successor and the rightful inheritor of his charismatic authority, he is enacting what he seems on some level to know is an already-nostalgic fantasy of poetic transmission. Lowell's proposal to Pound rests on a model of magically meritocratic literary succession, taking place on a personal level and based on personal qualities, with no need for institutions or any formal structures of continuity and fairness. But even given this premise, not only does the self-fashioning his letter performs partake of tropes of routinization, the letter also engages the university as a central foil for Lowell's poetic self-definition, and it is telling that even as he rejects it, a life in the university still forms the backdrop against which he defines his own ambition. Simultaneous attraction and resistance to this life and its values create much of the poignancy of this letter, and continue to motivate Lowell's understanding of what it means to be a poet, with powerful impulses toward routinization and professionalization running up against contempt for the domestications of university life, contempt he expresses even more strongly a few months later in a letter to his parents:

I consider a college education and degree as not only valueless but detrimental. One does not meet interesting or useful people. I have no interest in college life or athletics of any sort. The courses (English in particular, also the others) are largely conservative hack work conducted by mediocrities . . .

The last thing I would want to do would be to teach or profess, or get a fellowship.²⁴

But Lowell did go on, of course, to teach and profess and to get many fellowships, even without ever fully abandoning the attitude he expresses here. The details of how this happened have important consequences for the version of poetic authority that Lowell eventually brought to his career. Lowell's fantasy of a private education from Pound was never realized; instead he began an inexorable progression toward an academic career. Hoping to "forge my way into reality," Lowell instead found his way into the center of the movement to professionalize the poet within the university. Introduced through a family connection in 1937, the summer after he wrote to Pound, Lowell met poet-professor Allen Tate and became a junior member of Tate's circle. This circle, which included John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and other alumni of Vanderbilt University's Southern Agrarian literary movement, offered Lowell an appealing alternative to Harvard and Boston, one that, like Lowell's own self-fashioning-in-progress, involved its own implausible reconciliation of forward-thinking and nostalgic impulses. The next year, Lowell followed Ransom to Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. This consequential decision to leave the prestige of Harvard for what could be seen as a Midwestern exile is often seen as an act of rebellion against Lowell's Boston family, but in fact the arrangement worked partly because it presented Lowell's parents with a sufficiently impressive and formalized model of poetic apprenticeship for them to accept it as "a queer but orderly step."²⁵ For Lowell himself, too, the move functioned as a middle ground between the full academic incorporation of a Harvard education and anti-institutionality taken to the point of not getting a college degree at all. It suggested that poetic culture could establish its own alternative landscape of significant institutions.

Lowell's introduction to the literary milieu of his future mentors is a legendary act of eccentricity that he fondly described later as "a terrible piece of youthful callousness."²⁶ Armed with a second-hand invitation, Lowell drove from Boston to the Tates' house in Tennessee:

I think I suggested that maybe I'd stay with them. And they said, we really haven't got any room, you'd have to pitch a tent on the lawn." So I went to Sears, Roebuck and got a tent and rigged it on their lawn. The Tates were too polite to tell me that what they'd said was just a figure of speech. I stayed two months in my tent and ate with the Tates.

As this recollection makes clear, Lowell's initial contact with Tate and his circle resembled the one he wanted to make with Pound in the sense that it was informal and personal, non-institutional and lacking any competition or dilution of the experience of mentorship from the presence of other young people. But despite the intimacy and informality of Lowell's summer on the lawn, the model of apprenticeship that the young poet must have imagined from within his "green umbrella tent obliquely under a lotus tree"²⁷ was somewhat at odds with the program of literary education that his new mentors were working to establish. In a history well-documented by Gerald Graff, Alan Golding, and others, Tate and the other Southern writers who became known as New Critics were specifically dedicated not to a charismatic model of poetic authority that could be mystically transmitted to chosen successors but to replacing it with one more similar to other models of mid-century professionalism,²⁸ enacted through the institution of the university. The reasons for this were complex, and initially had more to do with the reception than the production of poetry, with the New Critical poet-professors following I.A. Richards and other British critics in arguing that the explication of difficult modernist poems required a professionalized critical corps.²⁹ In his 1938 essay "Criticism Inc.," Ransom, Lowell's Kenyon mentor, explains that "rather than occasional criticism by amateurs, I should think the whole enterprise might be seriously taken in hand by professionals" and, further, that "criticism must

become more scientific, or precise and systematic, and this means that it must be developed by the collective and sustained effort of learned persons—which means that its proper seat is in the universities.”³⁰ The American New Critics, then, campaigned to elevate criticism to a professional and professorial enterprise, and, as invested parties in internecine disputes within the evolving discipline of college English, to displace historical and philological study as the primary activities of English departments.

As Alan Golding points out, that Tate, Ransom, and the others were poets as well as professors is often viewed as incidental to their views on criticism and the university, a quaint historical coincidence.³¹ The poet-professors’ own understanding of the meaning of the hyphen in the terms “poet-professor” and “poet-critic” was complicated and highly variable. In “Criticism, Inc.,” for instance, Ransom seems to denigrate the critical faculties of poets and to endorse the separation of writing and professing, claiming—somewhat ironically, as a poet himself—that a poet differs from a critic because his “understanding is intuitive rather than dialectical—he cannot very well explain his theory of the thing.”³² Though Ransom applies this judgment primarily to poets’ criticism of their own work, it suggests a more general ambivalence about subjecting the creative act to the rigors of professionalism he argues will be so salutary for criticism. While a critic should be systematic, scientific, and learned, Ransom implies, a poet, even one who is technically the same person as the critic, will always have a haphazard understanding of poetry and of the processes that produce it. This ambivalence, unacknowledged in this essay, would later lead Ransom and his circle to complicate and retreat from their advocacy of professionalism to a celebration of the status of the amateur. Illustrating this point, Golding cites R.P. Blackmur’s 1950 statement that a poet should be a “master-layman” as

evidence that these poets came to feel that “the routinizing . . . of New Criticism involves too much professionalism, and a corrective dose of amateurism is needed.”³³

By the time Lowell placed himself under the tutelage of Tate and Ransom, the emerging prominence of the academic activity of creative writing had begun to muddy these waters further. As D.G. Myers argues in *The Elephants Teach*, the American New Critics originally understood the creation of the academic discipline of creative writing as continuous with their advocacy of a criticism based on close reading and textual analysis, on the logic that learning to write poems would compel attention to the complex structures that it was the proper province of criticism to elucidate.³⁴ Even if not the original goal, however, the potential of creative writing classes to present an accessible site and a systematic program for the education of future poets, not just critics, soon became obvious. And as the two fields developed simultaneously, the overlap between critical and creative education was substantial, with significant, if ambivalent, cross-pollination. At the same time that, as Myers claims, the goals of criticism were motivating pedagogy in creative writing, the principles of New Critical literary analysis were also being presented its curriculum, with close reading being suggested as an antidote to the difficulties of transmitting literary authority within the flawed milieu of the academy. “Mr. Tate considers modestly,” Ransom writes in “Mr. Tate and the Professors,” a Kenyon Review editorial published in 1940, Lowell’s senior year, “or it may be in strict logical propriety, that it is not within his power really to teach his young men how to write. The practicable thing, as he sees it, is to teach them how to read, and thereby, and only indirectly, how to write.”³⁵ This formulation of creative writing pedagogy is typical of Ransom’s circle’s conflicted attitudes toward literary education, in the way it combines a pretense of systemization with a perpetuation of the sense of poetic talent’s irreducible nature and a somewhat mystical logic of election: Tate’s reading

curriculum will, Ransom argues, lead inevitably to writing, which will, helpfully, make it possible “for everybody concerned to see whether a given man has in him the turn for writing, and is justified in going on.” In this formulation, then, New Critical pedagogy is connected to literary vocation not because it provides skills and knowledge with direct or inherent usefulness, but because it acts as a catalyst for the emergence of pre-existing literary talent, an attitude, constructively or problematically, at odds with the scientific spirit that is behind the New Criticism in the first place.

This is the world in which Lowell, not by accident, excelled. The talent for apprenticeship that directed his confident if unsuccessful appeal to Pound also helped him to navigate the new gray areas between formal and informal education that the pedagogies of Tate and Ransom were creating. Continuing his “not only valueless but detrimental” college education at Kenyon, as Ransom began a new employment there, and sharing a room in his mentor’s house with Randall Jarrell, another Ransom recruit, Lowell was both an ordinary college student and Ransom’s personal disciple. As Ransom recalled in a memoir, “Lowell was not the man . . . that one could hold off very long at an official distance,”³⁶ especially given the living situation, Lowell’s membership in the close-knit group of ambitious writers who had followed Ransom to Kenyon, and Lowell’s activities the previous summer, which had included not only the camp-out on Tate’s lawn but also two writers’ conferences with his mentors and a stint as Ford Madox Ford’s personal secretary and transcriptionist. At college, too, the contact extended far outside the classroom, blurring the lines not only between the personal and pedagogical but also between institutional and familial relationships: “Mr. Ransom looks out for me better than you could wish,” Lowell wrote reassuringly to his mother soon after arrival, “getting me to take exercise and even making my bed for me one night.”³⁷ College, seemingly an

indoctrination after all into impersonal institutionality, was instead blurring the domestic and the institutional.

But while Lowell was enjoying his special status as a favored son and a poetic protégé, he was also absorbing the values and routines of college life, more congenial at Kenyon, smaller and less class-bound, than at Harvard. His program of study was directed by Ransom, who encouraged him to study classics and treated him as a favored son: “We at Kenyon were not long in putting him down in our books as a ‘young man most likely to succeed’; shall I add, in the vocation of letters? Of course he would land there inevitably.”³⁸ But what Lowell did not do, despite his widely recognized and supported ambition as a poet, was receive any direct classroom instruction in creative writing, a program that had yet to exist at Kenyon. Instead, he followed the approach Ransom attributed to Tate in “Mr. Tate and the Professors,” with training in a critical approach to reading forming the basis of a poetic education. As an ordinary student, he took a range of courses, attended school assemblies, applied for fellowships, submitted to and was rejected by the campus literary magazine, and even played football (often “plowing into his own teammates.”³⁹ After graduation, he wrote to “Mother and Daddy” bragging about his conventional collegiate successes, which were substantial: “Monday I graduated summa cum laude, phi beta kappa, highest honors in classics, first man in my class and valedictorian.”⁴⁰

So by the time Lowell received his undergraduate degree, his distaste for collegiate life and values had softened into a tense and ambivalent detente, both with the role of the university in his own life and with the increasing academization of poetry in general. As he neared graduation, Lowell was seeking opportunities to “teach or profess or get a fellowship” to the exclusion of any other options, as he shows in an uncharacteristically ungracious letter to his cousin A. Lawrence Lowell, who just happened to be the President of Harvard, a letter nominally

“written principally for general advice” but clearly in fact intended to open a door to an opportunity.⁴¹ This letter, though self-serving, also offers a window into Lowell’s current view of the relationship between formal education and a poetic career, an entity “as hard to guide as Plato’s horses.” Emphasizing the actual education, not just the financial support, that a hoped-for fellowship would provide, Lowell writes that

I cannot think it a pedantry that a man desiring to speak (or sing) something important should also desire to speak with certainty. Also if he lacks scope, such as an acquaintance with science and an acquaintance with other languages, he will be romantic and an anachronism.⁴²

The affinity stated here for well-educated professional expertise in contrast to intuitive romanticism indicates how fully Lowell had absorbed the lessons of his New Critical mentors. But it is equally telling that this affinity is linked in his mind to poetic ambition in the public sphere, to the desire “to speak (or sing) something important.” As he began positioning his career, Lowell saw with unusual clarity that his ability to fulfill this public ambition would depend on complex acts of educational and institutional self-fashioning that would affect his poetry not only by giving him “an acquaintance” with things he needed to know, but also by altering his identity itself. Though it seems like a small shift, the movement in this letter from having or not having knowledge to being or not being “romantic and an anachronism” is important. It reflects the degree to which Lowell understood educated professionalism as constitutive of identity and identity as constitutive of poetic possibility.

One of the Pilgrim Makers: Success and Succession in *Lord Weary’s Castle*

Both Lowell’s acts of professional self-fashioning as a young man and his celebrated first major book of poems, *Lord Weary’s Castle*, can be read as participating in a set of struggles and engagements with the idea that the lyric self is the product of a patchwork of relative

positionings and institutional affiliations. For Lowell, one consequence of this struggle was a search for an external, institutional source of authority to ground and anchor the important poetic contributions he hoped to make. This search shows Lowell to have been a dutiful student of his teachers, and the fact that he rejected the idea of innate poetic authority as “romantic and an anachronism” suggests the degree to which his enthusiasm for the poetic projects of New Criticism was authentic; indeed, as Stephen Gould Axelrod puts it, “more conspicuously than any other poetic volume of the 1940s, *Lord Weary’s Castle* was able to advance the aesthetic and political projects of the New Criticism.”⁴³ But Lowell saw—or felt—farther than his mentors in the sense that he understood the increasing institutionalization of poetic authority as tied up with societal and psychological changes that would be sweeping and potentially destructive on both literary and personal levels. For him, the universal enrollment of poets in a university program to stamp out “anachronism” was not just a necessary revision to a flawed old practice, but a dilemma and an ambivalence—and, therefore, a theme. Lowell’s early work consistently dramatizes this dilemma between the external institutions in which reside authority and permanence and the immediacy of lived experience, the kernel of authority within the individual voice. In *Lord Weary’s Castle*, Lowell begins to posit this dilemma as central to modern identity, and explores its painful repercussions in poems that draw for authority on both personal testimony and institutional wisdom, holding the two in strained, contradictory suspension.

At a remove, Lowell’s response to the tensions within modernism and the burgeoning dominance of the university might appear unusual. He became a Catholic. This religious conversion exhibits Lowell’s characteristic entanglement of the personal with the poetic, solving what was, in some sense, a literary problem not only with his pen but with his immortal soul. Rather than rejecting the institutional affiliation that seemed to be increasingly and

problematically constitutive of poetic authority, in other words, he chose an alternative institution to the university, one whose antiquity, spirituality, and controlling character seemed to connote a raw power absent in the culture of the university. This comparison seems particularly relevant because Lowell's conversion to Catholicism took place in the context of a university: on Ransom's recommendation that "the last of the Lowells bearing that name" was "a strong man"⁴⁴ he received a junior fellowship at Louisiana State University, not to study poetry but to prepare to write a biography of Puritan religious leader Jonathan Edward, one of his illustrious ancestors. That he chose this program of study indicates already Lowell's attraction to the institutions of religion and family over the institutions of literary professionalism. His letters from the time are disdainful of university culture, referring to "the solemn and liberal English majors" and proclaiming that "I have taken as my motto, 'in Rome consort with the Romans and never do as they do.'" Even the opportunity to study with Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, New Critical sages and the authors of the seminal *Understanding Poetry*, ultimately pushed Lowell away from following a path into a university literary career himself: "Here reign the critical approach, 'the aesthetic approach,' 'metaphysical poetry,' 'drama in the lyric,' etc. The students are weak and worthy. Brooks and Warren / Brooks and Warren are excellent. Especially Warren; result: I am reading English theology."⁴⁵ For Lowell, the cultural authority of the university was paradoxically both too routinized, a matter of tendentious "approaches," and also insufficiently rigorous and powerful, "solemn and liberal," "weak and worthy." A lecture by LSU's Catholic chaplain, Maurice Schexnayder, provided Lowell with an opportunity to seek out religious instruction, and his conversion soon followed.

Lowell's conversion was to be short-lived; the authority of the religious believer did not ultimately provide him with a lasting platform for important speech. But the poems he wrote

during his Catholic period—what Nick Halpern calls his “prophetic” poems⁴⁶—set the stage for understanding his lifelong obsession with the relation between individual existence and the institutions that structure and define the possibilities for identity and influence in the larger world. Biography makes clear that much the appeal of Catholicism for Lowell personally was its rigor and formalism, but also that the stakes of his conversion were at least as much literary as religious: he wanted to write “devotional poetry—the poetry of Dante, Milton, Herbert, and Hopkins, the poetry of Eliot.”⁴⁷ Langdon Hammer argues that T.S. Eliot, also a religious convert, creates in his vision of literary tradition an “imaginary institution”⁴⁸; for Lowell, the actual institution of the church offered a point of entry into this imaginary institution, a less tangible and therefore potentially more powerful and charismatic position than any a university post could provide. This ability to access the tradition of “devotional poetry” manifests itself in *Lord Weary’s Castle* in explicitly theological reflections such as the “Black Rock” poems, structured according to the liturgical calendar. It also leads to Catholic interpolations into poems on other subjects, such as the final section of an elegy for Lowell’s grandfather, “In Memory of Arthur Winslow,” “A Prayer for My Grandfather to Our Lady.” This section, a reworking of a poem by François Villon, overlays a European and Catholic literary tradition onto the New England history of Lowell’s family’s roots, a complex gesture in which the memory of Lowell’s American grandfather’s failures is redeemed by an appeal to a religious and literary tradition of old Europe. In all of these examples, the more explicitly religious and the more secular alike, Lowell mingles the realms of the everyday and the transcendent. “Devotional poetry,” for Lowell, does not exist in the abstract but is a matter of a willful recognition of a Catholic order within the resistant ordinary world.

As Lowell's religious poems attempt to think their way to a viable modern institutionality, they draw on cultural, literary, and hereditary authority, along with the authority of religious believer. In "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," for example, nominally an elegy for another Winslow relation, Lowell's cousin Warren Winslow is joined by important figures from a variety of traditions: Thoreau, Orpheus, Ahab, Odysseus, Jonah, Milton's Lycidas, and, of course, the Quakers themselves, among many others. Lowell's decision to gather all of these figures in the fantastical Nantucket in which his poem is set recalls the young poet who loved collecting and wrote to Pound that he "caught over thirty turtles and put them in a well where they died of insufficient feeding."⁴⁹ Indeed, the dense referentiality of *Lord Weary's Castle* can become taxing, with the poems occasionally seeming overcrowded without a full integration of their sources into a coherent symbolic scheme. Many lines suggest an abrupt mixing of registers, a strained incongruity: for instance, "All you recovered from Poseidon died / With you, my cousin" overlays Greek mythology onto a family relationship, whereas "In the great ash-pit of Jehoshaphat / The bones cry for the blood of the white whale" introduces the unlikely thought of whales into a presumably arid Biblical landscape.⁵⁰ But this imperfect integration is in fact crucial to the complex and ambivalent authority of the poems of *Lord Weary's Castle*. The strange juxtapositions seem an attempt to unite histories and ideas that are all clearly important but that resist unification. The world, in these poems, is recalcitrant, its ultimate coherence doubtful. This condition, the poems suggest, is what requires poetry, and the poems must show it for what it is.

Allen Tate speaks to this in the introduction to Lowell's first book *Land of Unlikeness*, which contained many of the same poems that would later be found in *Lord Weary's Castle*: "Lowell is consciously a Catholic poet, and it is possible to see a close connection between his

style and the formal pattern. The style is bold and powerful, and the symbolic language often has the effect of being *willed*".⁵¹ Tate's oblique equivalence between Catholicism and the "*willed*" nature of the poems' symbolic schemes gestures, most basically, to the willful nature of faith itself. At the same time, paradoxically, the poems can suggest faith as a solution to this condition. Lowell's Catholicism presents a vision of the world that offers solace and redemption without denying the violent, overwrought chaos that the poems so vividly describe. For example, in "A Quaker Graveyard," the bloody images of whaling and death at sea are interrupted by a change of scene to a pastoral idyll of religious peace. Lowell wrenches the reader away from Nantucket to "the Carmelite Monastery of Walsingham, in Norfolk, England . . . a popular shrine to Mary in pre-Reformation days . . . destroyed in 1538":

Once the penitents took off their shoes
And then walked barefoot the remaining mile;
And the small trees, a stream and hedgerows file
Slowly along the munching English lane,
Like cows to the old shrine, until you lose
Track of your dragging pain.⁵²

Among these images of sudden peace, the Lady herself "Expressionless, expresses God"—a god that transcends not only human suffering but also human emotion and human reason. "What the lady of Walsingham represents is past contention," writes Robert Hass. "She's just there. The method of the poem simply includes her among its elements, past argument, as a possibility through which all the painful seeing in the poem can be transformed and granted peace."⁵³ This presence is the central force in the world of the poems, but the poems, as human artifacts, cannot provide access to it; they can only intimate its existence, and demonstrate our need.

The Walsingham shrine and monastery to which these penitents retreat also resembles the modern university in important ways. The shrine is physically separated from daily life, peaceful and bucolic like the campuses of Kenyon and LSU, a place for contemplation, for the

preservation of tradition, and for access to traditions of authority and truth. Both the university and the church also serve to mediate between cultural tradition and the individual, and to guide individuals, whether students or parishioners, in their lives. Both institutions also embody similar contradictions as enormous and powerful machines supposedly dedicated to a purpose beyond institutionality. But unlike the university, the Walsingham that provides the haven of peace within the chaotic world of the poem offers no knowledge that could fit Ransom's formulation from "Criticism, Inc.," "scientific, or precise and systematic"; instead, it offers the sense that "Our Lady . . . knows what God knows," a formula as opposed as possible to academic thinking and pedagogy. Not only is the Lady's knowledge inaccessible, her very possession of this knowledge is itself only known through the poem's pure assertion. Nothing can be proved or verified or even investigated; this, in a way, is what provides the peace of this section of the poem, obviating the necessity of fallible human exertion.

From the position of poetic charisma, the anti-rationality of this section of the poem expresses humility but also creates power. As Tate recognizes when he makes reference to Lowell's "bold and powerful" language, the "devotional poetry" of the religious convert is not only an expression of "truth" but an act of will, as an engine of personal expression and a wrenching of the world into the poet's own vision. In this sense, faith, the salutary faith that replaces the ocean "fouled with the blue sailors" with a carpet of soft grass and a field of gentle cows, is itself violent and despotic. In it, we are as adrift as the drowned sailor; the speaker of the poem, who longs for submission himself, also controls our vision as fully as the god who "formed man from the sea's slime." Faith's desire to cede authority, then, also creates authority. Dismantling reason and asserting the ultimate authority of the divine, it reinforces a hierarchical world and claims some portion of authority for the enlightened believer. "Devotional poetry,"

then, does not only open a door connecting Lowell's work to a powerful tradition but is also a mode of authority the poet can productively locate in his own perspective alone. Particularly because poems such as "Quaker Graveyard" also invite the reader to witness the heroic poetic task of uniting vast and disparate material—much of it related to Lowell's own biography—the religious authority Lowell invokes is highly personal, vested in the poet himself.

For Lowell, efforts to develop a viable mode of textual authority were inseparable from his self-fashioning on a personal level. It is not surprising, therefore, that this authority also provided a platform for public engagement in non-textual modes as well as in his published poems. In *Lord Weary's Castle* and the Winslow poems in particular, Lowell counter-intuitively suggests that Catholic identity can provide a basis for defining American identity and reimagining and revitalizing the ambivalent prestige of his New-England-aristocratic family background. This same logic also underlies his highly theatrical public refusal to serve in WWII in 1943, for which he was convicted of a felony and sentenced to prison and community service—all of which, of course, becoming material for later poems. "I am not a pacifist but a Catholic,"⁵⁴ he corrected a friend, explaining his motivations. He elaborated on these motivations in a letter to his "fellow-citizen" Franklin D. Roosevelt, in a letter as widely publicized as possible: "you will understand how painful such a decision is for an American whose family traditions, like your own, have always found their fulfillment in maintaining, through responsible participation in both the civil and the military services, our country's freedom and honor."⁵⁵ In the rhetorical world of this letter, the authority of Lowell's Catholicism enhances and reanimates the authority of his family background; it is as representative of these traditions that his personal decision takes on a larger meaning and becomes worthy of public and presidential notice.

To Dedicate My Life, Etc: Lowell in the University

What dissipated the religious fervor of *Lord Weary's Castle*, turning Lowell from the institutional poet of the all-powerful church to the poet of the carving school? One suggestive explanation is vocation. The vocational anxiety of modern life is already a feature of *Lord Weary's Castle*: like Robert Lowell Sr., for example, the elegized Arthur Winslow is also shown to fail at business, and the poem references “the craft / That netted you a million dollars, late / Hosing out gold in Colorado’s waste, / Then lost it all in Boston real estate.”⁵⁶ But despite its obsession with institutional authority, *Lord Weary's Castle* is relatively unconcerned with vocational identity—that is, the relationship between what one *does* within institutions and who one *is*. In *Life Studies*, this concern has become paramount, and it is intriguing to consider the possibility that, from a biographical standpoint, the change was teaching. Lowell, by the time of *Life Studies*, had unexpectedly followed his father into a career as a cog—if a reluctant and unreliable cog—in an institutional machine. His tenure as a poet-professor and a teacher of creative writing meant an active performance of institutional authority, day after day, student after student. It is unsurprising in this circumstance that the nature of this authority would begin to seem personal rather than rhetorical, and its stakes human rather than grand and abstract. In Lowell’s own life, poetic vocation became a profession, increasing his sense of poetic authority but also revealing that authority as a collusion between institutional structure and embodied performance. The poetics of *Life Studies* could be said to be the result.

Lowell’s path to a teaching career was a convoluted one, characterized by a push-and-pull of resistance and resignation and eventually embraced more out of financial pragmatism than unfettered enthusiasm. This career began when he was thirty-three, lasted for the rest of his life and was not, on the face of it, particularly distinguished. Soon after Lowell’s arrival at his

first teaching job, at the University of Iowa, he described his new vocation in a letter to his friend Peter Taylor:

Teaching is rather awful—boning up on what you can't use, then faking. My greatest success has been reading Burns aloud with a Scotch accent. I really enjoy it, I guess, and intend to dedicate my life etc."⁵⁷

This description, with its oddly interwoven registers of earnestness and cynicism culminating in the unexpected “etc.,” typifies the ambivalent relationship Lowell had with his teaching throughout his career. This career brought him to many temporary positions across the country and internationally, and landed him for long stints first at Boston University and then at Harvard. Like most poet-professors, Lowell taught a courseload throughout his career that included both literature courses, organized around a period or canon, and creative writing workshops. Despite the early discouragement quoted above, the process of “boning up” for the literature courses continued to constitute a major vector of his reading and thinking, and reading out loud in class remained a mainstay of his classroom technique.

Lowell's students remember him as brilliant but diffident; in a typical, appreciative reminiscence, Helen Vendler, who took a class with him in 1955–56, describes him as “a mild, soft-spoken, and myopic man, his voice lost in the hard-surfaced room, [who] offered disconnected sentences that were more musings than messages.”⁵⁸ Like Vendler, most former students remember a teacher whose classroom manner reflected a sort of anti-charisma based partially on a resistance to formal or systematic pedagogy. “He taught almost by indirection,” poet Richard Tillinghast, another former student, recalls,⁵⁹ and Lowell himself wrote, in a 1957 letter to Randall Jarrell, “I teach, I'm afraid, like a painter, almost no preparation but very hard work in class. In that way it's very exciting for me, like going fishing.”⁶⁰ Lowell's casual and seemingly haphazard approach to teaching, frustrating in class, according to student

reminiscences, but valuable in retrospect, reflects not only laziness or a conviction that a real poet's work should not consist of lesson plans, but also a philosophical understanding of poetry as resistant to or in excess of the systemizing impulse that curricular organization requires. It is significant that fishing and painting are Lowell's analogies for teaching, activities that deal with the concrete material world rather than the more malleable world of abstractions. His choice of analogies also suggests how significantly Lowell's approach to poetry in the university differed from the utopian and scientifically minded justifications his mentors used to bring poetic interpretation into the classroom; just as learning about seven types of worms would be totally insufficient as a curriculum in fishing, a literary or creative approach based on easily teachable principles of taxonomy and analysis would fail, Lowell's methods seem to suggest, to bring in the desired catch.

Despite the mildness and indirectness of Lowell's classroom manner, however, his teaching was also perceived by his students as powerful and authoritative. W.D. Snodgrass, who was one of Lowell's first students, at Iowa, has repeated in several venues this memorable description of the forcefulness of Lowell's teaching:

A friend of mine said that when Lowell did a poem in the workshop, it was like having an octopus come and sit down on the thing: it would send out one arm and grab—philosophy. And it would send out another arm and grab—mythology. Another would haul in sociology. One after another he'd pull in all these different fields. You'd think, This man is as crazy as they told me. My poor little poem doesn't have anything to do with all this. And then he'd start tying them all together, and you would see he was right. You'd walk out of there just staggered.⁶¹

Lowell's strategy in the classroom, in other words, was to serve as an initiator to the world of literary significance, to mediate between the literary world and the world of his students, and the power to perform this mediation was the source and the mode of his literary authority. Vendler

describes a similar phenomenon in Lowell's literature class, writing that the value of Lowell's "musings" was that they showed students

the amplitude of response stirred by past poetry — which, in Lowell's hands, always seemed poetry of the present — in a poet who had earned his place 'on the slopes of Parnassus.' It was a response in which familiarity and reverence went hand in hand, in which technique and vision were indissoluble; it made the appearance of poetry in life seem as natural as any other action.⁶²

Contrary to Lowell's dismissive description in his National Book Award speech, then, his classroom in practice was not a space where poetry was broken up to be "tasted and digested," but, at its best, a vital and exciting point of contact between words on the page and readers in the real world. Vendler's description culminates:

It made one feel like a rather backward evolutionary form confronted by an unknown but superior species, and when one asked what the name of the species was, the answer came unbidden: Poet. Lowell's classes were a demonstration in the critical order of what those mysterious beings in the anthologies had in common — a relation to words beyond our ordinary powers.⁶³

Vendler's description is interesting because it suggests that Lowell's classroom experience allowed him to publicly embody and perform the distinct and revered role of "Poet." In the classroom, in other words, he performed a literary authority that was both personal and absolute, and while Vendler's analysis seems to presume this authority as entirely innate and prior to the classroom, it is also intriguing to imagine a more circular process in which this classroom authority might actually constitute and not only reflect a form of poetic confidence.

If in the literature classroom Lowell as Poet was able to position himself as a conduit between the great writers of the past and the readers of the present, the dynamics of the creative-writing classroom were inevitably more complicated. Still, Lowell's workshops, like his literature classes, were a place to formulate and disseminate his own reactions and impressions. Anne Sexton describes this with some frustration in a memoir of a 1958 workshop at Boston

University during which “we were not allowed to smoke, but everyone smoked anyhow, using their shoes as ashtrays,” and where she says Lowell approached poems “with a cold chisel, with no more mercy than a dentist”:

he would read the first line—stop—and discuss that line at length . . . dragging through it until you almost hated the damn thing—even your own, especially your own.⁶⁴

According to Alan Williamson, who studied with Lowell at Harvard in the late 60s, his pedagogical approach had become more streamlined by then but remained methodologically free-form and based on no curriculum more specific than Lowell’s own reactions to student poems:

He would listen to the student read the poem once, then read it aloud himself, his hand hovering like a divining-rod until he reached a particular detail or turn of phrase, then plumping down: “it comes to life here.”⁶⁵

As these memoirs show, Lowell’s students credit his workshops with important, if subtle, lessons in literary sensitivity and standards. The workshops’ effects on Lowell himself are less well documented, and, for his part, Lowell was quick to claim distance between his writing and teaching lives. In a 1961 *Paris Review* interview, Frederick Seidel asks Lowell, “Has your teaching over the last few years meant anything to you as a writer?” Lowell’s immediate reaction is a strong no: “Teaching is entirely different from writing,” he begins, and, by implication, entirely separate. But in fact, under Seidel’s gentle probing, Lowell goes on to theorize at length an array of effects teaching can have on a poet, emphasizing the practice of reaction and spontaneous judgment that characterizes his practice as a workshop leader. His conclusion reflects on the vision of poetic culture inherited from New Criticism:

It’s not only teaching, it’s growing up in this age of criticism which we’re all so conscious of, whether we like it or don’t like it, or practice it or don’t practice it. You think three times before you put a word down, and ten times about taking it out. And that’s related to boldness; if you put words down they

must do something, you're not going to put clichés. But then it's related to caution; you write much less.⁶⁶

To Lowell, then, the leading of workshops is related to the professionalization of poetry that the “age of criticism” represents, in the sense that it differentiates professional poets from amateurs by means of their more sophisticated standard of judgment, as well as their sense that their proper role is to categorize and judge. Implicit in Lowell’s statement is the fact, apparent to anyone who has led a writing workshop, that the particular critical judgment he refers to, the one that allows for the certainty that “you’re not going to put clichés,” is not developed through “age of criticism” activities like reading reviews of published poets by published poets, but through exposure, via the classroom, to large amounts of the poetry of amateurs. Lowell’s statement aptly captures the way that this sensitivity, the fatiguing quality of popular tropes when repeated over several semesters’ worth of student poems, can be both enabling and paralyzing for teaching poets. This fatigue and dissatisfaction with what has been done help to suggest why, as Lowell tells Seidel, “teaching may make the poetry even more different, less academic than it would be otherwise,” and may help to explain why Lowell’s own poetry took a turn for the less academic in *Life Studies*.

The immediacy and informality of the workshop scene of reception also may help to explain Lowell’s stylistic changes in *Life Studies*. Lowell occasionally read his own work in class, and, given his receptivity to the impressions of audiences, he may have calibrated his revisions according to what went over well in the workshop setting. In this setting, it is easy to imagine success for the aurally accessible, narrative voice of *Life Studies*, which could be readily appreciated without the involved study of subtle symbolic correspondences and complex layers of referentiality that the poems of *Lord Weary’s Castle* require of readers. Stylistically, the loosening that distinguishes *Life Studies* from Lowell’s previous volumes is also self-consciously

inspired by anti-academic poetic culture. Asked in an interview about his stylistic evolution, Lowell mentions a reading tour of the counter-culture West Coast poetry scene:

I'd been doing a lot of reading aloud. I went on a trip to the West Coast and read at least once a day and sometimes twice for fourteen days, and more and more I found that I was simplifying my poems. If I had a Latin quotation I'd translate it into English. If adding a couple of syllables in a line made it clearer I'd add them, and I'd make little changes just impromptu as I read. That seemed to improve the reading . . .⁶⁷

This learning experience suggests that Lowell's teaching actually helped him try to imagine a less "cooked" and academic poetry, and even the title *Life Studies* suggests an assertion that academia and experience can be combined. The teaching life may also have helped shape Lowell's poetic turn toward the personal as it occurs in *Life Studies*, perhaps due simply to the fact that the workshop's physical immediacy makes a pose of impersonality seem somewhat ridiculous. Furthermore, as Lowell became increasingly comfortable embodying a personal form of literary authority, as Vendler describes, this sense of the personal could have become an increasingly natural pose to take in his poems as well.

These consequences of the actual work of teaching may have in some ways ameliorated the burden Lowell felt university employment to be in terms of self-fashioning, but for Lowell, the fact of this employment was never comfortable. In a perceptive essay on Lowell and John Berryman, Marjorie Perloff makes the case that in terms of poetic authority the problems of professorship far outweighed the benefits. She argues that Lowell's flawed personal life, his infidelities, betrayals, and bouts of clinical mania, can be viewed as an attempt to counterbalance the institutionalization of the university, a stratagem intended to reclaim the unpredictable and wild charisma of the outsider, lost through the routinization of a "classroom civilization." Both Lowell and Berryman are, she says, "Bad Boy Professors . . . the Baudelairean poete maudit turned academic . . . the outsider poet, alienated from his society, who is really the quintessential

fellowship holder and prize winner.”⁶⁸ “These knocks are almost a proof of intelligence and valor in us,” she quotes Lowell writing to Berryman on the subject of their various unhappinesses, as evidence that the suffering, mental breakdowns, and general bad behavior of this “tragic generation” of poets can be attributed to their attempts to make up for poetic deficits caused by the “classroom civilization” and its corollaries, too little passion and too much success. With lives narrowed to a single career track, “there was precious little material to write poems about,” leading to a myopic focus on “the self, endlessly dissected by Freudian analysis, the self, falling in and out of love, making friends and enemies, and hopelessly ambivalent about fathers and mothers.”⁶⁹ With no access to an outside perspective, with literariness all the way down, as it were, the self is pressed into service as both the subject and the object of lyric authority.

Lowell himself describes this situation in a 1965 interview: “It is extreme (and perhaps unique, even) about America, that the artist’s existence becomes his art. He is re-born in it, and he hardly exists without it,” adding that “we are talking about the arts being, perhaps, more a profession in the States.”⁷⁰ He notes with a touch of embarrassment that this is peculiar to his generation, writing to William Carlos Williams in 1959 that “now I am buckling back to my classes, no great task compared with delivering babies, still it’s something and has to be done professionally, though not professorially.”⁷¹ For Perloff, the consequences of this literary professionalization are overwhelmingly negative—self-indulgence, philistinism, aesthetic and political conservatism. For Lowell, however, such judgments are almost beside the point, not because they are not true but because they are a given. In Lowell’s work, intense reflexivity and the frantic and conflicted performance of personality appears as the raw material at hand, the condition of modern life and literary culture. That *Life Studies* helped to invent a mode in which to express this condition is a reason for its lasting influence.

Life Studies IV

In the fourth section of *Life Studies*, these various biographical, poetic, and cultural threads come together to create a multifaceted poetics of vocational self-fashioning. This poetics depicts the great institutions of modernity—not only the university and the church, but also the military, the mental hospital, and even the family—as their values and practices shape, constrain, and enable the lives of individuals who act within them. In a recursive and continuous process, Lowell shows vocation as the vexed point of contact between the individual and what is lasting, so that while institutions create agency and are themselves shaped and perpetuated by those who function within them, they also demand submission. The poems in *Life Studies* represent this recognition on multiple levels, as they not only stage vocational dramas but also point to themselves as actors in the reflexive construction of identity that institutional vocation demands. In this sense, all the dramas of *Life Studies*, from the poems about Lowell’s father to those that deal explicitly with the adult life of Lowell himself, are dramas about the making of *Life Studies*, about the pathos and contradictions of the authority of the speaking self within the uncertainties of modernity. As *Lord Weary’s Castle* is in part about a search for lyric authority—an essay of the authority of tradition and belief—*Life Studies* locates that search within an increasingly self-conscious performance of personal, embodied roles through which institutional forces converge on the individual, including the role of, à la Vendler, “Poet.”

For Lowell’s father, as we have already seen, this drama is played out in a tragicomic mode. As he tries to make his way in the waning world of aristocratic Boston, whose values include little respect for professional identity, “Poor Father” clings increasingly to a vocation that is, as Lowell said of his own poetics, “either a death rope or a lifeline”—or both. In “Commander

Lowell,” this vocation—Naval officer—both allows Lowell’s father to define himself to himself and also prevents him from functioning effectively in his surroundings. The poem’s title is followed by Lowell’s father’s dates (1887–1950) and gives the impression of being a full portrait, a summing-up. Lowell shows his father lost amidst the hostile Bluebloods, attempting literally to use the tools of his vocation to negotiate his new circumstances —an “ivory Annapolis slide rule,” a “blue serge jacket and numbly cut / white ducks he’d bought / at a Pearl Harbor commissariat.”⁷² These tools prove, of course, inadequate. In the world of Boston aristocracy, represented by Lowell’s mother, professionalism even within the military is simply gauche, regardless of its achievements: to drive this point absurdly home, Lowell recalls his mother reading to him about Marie Louise Hapsburg, wife of the disappointing Napoleon, who “scratched his navel / and bolted his food.” This class judgment is laced with a damaging nostalgia, a sense of belatedness that extends to Commander Lowell’s own life; the poem ends

And once
nineteen, the youngest ensign in his class,
he was “the old man” of a gunboat on the Yangtze.⁷³

Within this disconcerting telescoping of time, the senior Lowell is already an old man at nineteen, his achievements seemingly behind him, while these achievements are also, paradoxically, based on his youth.

This confusion between youth and age, a projection of a cultural nostalgia onto individual figures, also animates the poems in *Life Studies* IV as they begin to be set in Lowell’s own adulthood. In these poems, modernity complicates the conflicts over professional identity as they become less explicitly matters of class and inheritance, less conflicts between individuals (i.e. Lowell’s parents), and more conflicts within them. In “Waking in the Blue,” Lowell internalizes this conflict, placing himself amidst adopted father figures in McLean Hospital—a storied

mental institution in Belmont, Massachusetts, outside of Boston. Here the culture clash between aristocratic ideals and modern vocationalism is played out again, this time staged with Lowell himself poised between young, working-class orderlies and aging patients whose aristocratic backgrounds seem to show themselves to be “gracefully insane.”⁷⁴ University education is explicitly a field of social distinction and identity-formation in the poem; it begins with a description of an orderly:

The night attendant, a B.U. sophomore,
rouses from the mare’s-nest of his drowsy head,
propped on *The Meaning of Meaning*.

Later, the poem uses the same educational symbolism to describe two inmates:

Stanley, now sunk in his sixties,
once a Harvard all-American fullback
(if such were possible!)
. . . A kingly granite profile in a crimson golf-cap,
worn all day, all night

and

“Bobbie,”
Porcellian ’29,
a replica of Louis XVI
without the wig⁷⁵

In these descriptions, the Harvard-graduate patients who are explicitly described in terms of aristocracy (even royalty) still identify in terms of their educational status (the crimson of the golf cap is Harvard’s school color; the Porcellian is the most exclusive of the student social clubs known on Harvard’s campus as “finals clubs”). But this identification is not only divorced from any substantive educational content, it is also a symbol of the patients’ mental illness; they are “victorious figures of bravado ossified young.” The young attendant, on the other hand, who attends the less prestigious and less blueblooded Boston University, is at least attempting to study, but has fallen asleep instead. The classic semiotics textbook serving as his pillow, *The*

Meaning of Meaning, suggests by way of its seemingly tautological title either a deeply scientific-rational approach to the world, one that questions even fundamental premises such as meaning, or a basic cluelessness. Part of the drama of the poem is that the Harvard-graduate “thoroughbred mental cases” do not need to be told what meaning is—but what they count as meaning is utterly empty.

The poem’s middle-aged speaker is caught between the worlds of the young orderlies and the elderly patients. Lowell’s biography helps to show the indeterminacy of this placement on multiple levels; a temporary patient only, he would at the time of the poem soon be leaving the mental hospital, and although the poem is narrated in present tense, the reader is aware that the experience is in fact in the past. Unlike Stanley and “Bobbie,” too, Lowell, though also a “Mayflower screwball,” did not graduate from Harvard, his transfer to Kenyon symbolically, perhaps, having broken the chain of experience that would lead to a lifetime of nostalgic insanity. And Lowell, at the time the poem was written, was in fact teaching at B.U., the school of the night attendant, providing, in his professorial role, a bridge between the two worlds of the poem. Although his teaching career is not mentioned overtly in “Waking in the Blue,” the fact of it alters the dynamics of the scene. While Lowell groups himself ultimately with the patients in the poem’s last lines—“we are all old timers / each of us holds a locked razor”—he is in fact less one who knows from birth “the meaning of meaning,” and more one who must construct, contest—and teach—that meaning.

The indeterminate and bewildering status of the professor is given the fullest treatment in “Memories of West Street and Lepke,” which comes near the end of the book and poem examines Lowell’s vocational anxieties by way of comparison not only with one of *Life Studies*’

many allegorical representations of failed professionalism but also with Lowell's own past self in the days when the Catholic church was his platform for self-definition and public engagement.

The poem begins with Lowell describing his current life in "the tranquilized Fifties":

Only teaching on Tuesdays, book-worming
in pajamas fresh from the washer each morning,
I hog a whole house on Boston's
"hardly passionate Marlborough Street."⁷⁶

This description paints a stereotypical picture of the soft professorial life that is almost comic in its exaggeration, a hyperbole that gives the impression that Lowell speaks less for himself than as a caricature of an imaginary professor who, kept and domesticated by the university, partakes in both unapologetic, animalistic indulgence (as the parasitic worm and the wallowing hog) and refined cultural snobbery ("hardly passionate Marlborough Street" doubling this snobbery, as an obscure and delicately ironic quotation from Henry James on the subject of a fancy address). On some level, Lowell shows us how appalling it would be to accept this life unselfconsciously, neither recognizing the unjust privilege he embodies nor having the decency to be embarrassed about spending the day in pajamas. This professor, privileged, isolated, inert, is a specter that Lowell feared since he wrote to Pound at nineteen. He seems to be a man with neither profession nor vocation: his teaching amounts to little; his own literary activity is mere "book-worming."

But behind the self-satisfied tone of the professor-speaker of the poem, as he matter-of-factly narrates his daily routines, the poet's harsh condemnation of these routines is also audible in the speaker's lack of perspective and in the very excesses in which he seems to revel. This tone is complex; if the poem maintains a sense of separation from its speaker, the professor is a comfortable figure of condemnation and mockery, an unflattering cliché come to life, but because the poem is explicitly autobiographical, the poet Lowell and the character of the speaker instead coexist in uneasy relation. Embodying, speaking in the voice of, the most unappealing

popular image of his professional role, Lowell seems to validate the stereotype, sharpening it with the extra edge of self-recrimination.

The “flabby, bald, lobotomized” Lepke is a counterpart to the pajamaed professor of the poem’s beginning. Similarly animalistic, he moves “in a sheepish calm” toward his execution, resembling nothing so much as a sacrificial victim being fattened for the kill. This image seems an even further exaggeration of the fears expressed in the poem’s opening and presents a chilling, if absurd, analogy for the tradeoffs exacted by university work, associating professorship with the peculiar position of the sacrificial victim enjoying luxuries neither lasting nor deserved. And the nature of Lepke’s crimes is particularly telling in terms of his role as a foil to Lowell; as a member of “Murder, Incorporated,” a cartel so named by journalists because it kept assassins on a payroll, Lepke is another example of Lowell’s concern with the professionalization of activities that should not be professionalized. Like the carving school of “91 Revere Street,” but in a very different register, Murder Inc. represents the creeping institutionalization and routinization of modern life about which Lowell felt widely concerned and in which he felt personally implicated. As with Lowell himself, in the role of the professor of the beginning of the poem, Lepke’s association with a dubious institution has robbed him of his individuality, vitality, and ability to engage with the world, and has instead penned him in to a world of worthless luxuries and false security in which the only “oasis” is death.

The description of Lepke, however, leaves one modest opening for the poet who fears sharing the murderer’s fate: the “agonizing reappraisal” that appears only in the negative as a possible distraction, a distraction that, in fact, fails to interrupt Lepke’s lumbering march toward execution. If one of the goals of the book is for Lowell the poet to find a way to escape or to exist vitally within the luxurious prison of his professorial existence then this reappraisal

suggests itself as a rubric under which to understand the varied content of the book as a whole. The term is productively vague, descriptive of the affect—“agonizing”—rather than the content of the reappraisal, applicable narrowly to personal regrets and more broadly to systems, understandings, cultures. As such, it seems a useful rubric for the so-called Confessional mode that constitutes *Life Studies* itself. It suggests that the project of the book is the continual remaking of the self, a remaking that is also an act of historical storytelling and interpretation, and one that is both the predicament of modern life and its solution.

“But They Both Exist”: Revision

The rubric of “agonizing reappraisals” applies not only to Lowell’s autobiographical impulses but also to his writing practice. Lowell’s penchant for revision has become one of the touchstones of his reputation. (“You can’t derange or rearrange / your poems again” was Elizabeth Bishop’s poetic comment on his death.) Frank Bidart, Lowell’s former student and close collaborator, describes the most famous instance of public revision in his introduction to Lowell’s *Collected Poems*:

When he published in 1973 three sonnet books—*The Dolphin*, *History* and *For Lizzie and Harriet*—many reviewers were bewildered: two of these volumes came out of his previous book called *Notebook*. *The Times Literary Supplement*, in what we may characterize as an unsympathetic view of revision, with its review ran a drawing of a meat grinder chewing up books, turned by a man who stares out at us fixedly, demonically, with a half-smile. The main is, of course, Robert Lowell. Yet look at his work with any closeness and you discover that rethinking work, reimagining, rewriting it was fundamental to him from the beginning, and pervasive until the end.⁷⁷

This work of rethinking, reimagining, and rewriting, present throughout Lowell’s career but increasingly public toward its end, is not only a quirk personal to Lowell but is a fundamental process and orientation of the creative writing workshop. When Bidart writes that this process

was an integral part of “what he was doing as a writer, what he imagined his work as a writer to be,” he is reflecting an understanding that is built into the structure of the workshop, in which sharing, reworking, and resharing are the standard procedures.

Bidart tells the story of discussing with Lowell revisions to his poem “Waking Early Sunday Morning”:

I had fiddled and fiddled with the lines, trying to join the two versions, and failed. He had done the same. I bemoaned this state of affairs.

His reply is something that I have never forgotten, something that resonates throughout his work: “But they both exist.”

Lowell was willing to live with the idea that they both exist, that there is no perfect version of “Waking Early Sunday Morning.” *That we need not choose*. . . . Each version is a journey: each occasion that he inhabited the material, slightly different.⁷⁸

In this anecdote, the poetic understandings that underlie the workshop are also legible. One of the distinctions of the workshop as a scene of reception is that participants *need not choose* a completed version of a poem; instead, successive revisions are overlaid palimpsestically onto a participant’s experience of a “finished” poem. The poem as a whole, in this scene, becomes a journey, each version a component of a dynamic whole that dramatizes as a communal and participatory process what Bidart in this context quotes Henry James as calling “the thrilling ups and downs of the compositional problem.” Lowell, in his publication and re-publication of the poems of *Notebook*, opens up this journey beyond the classroom to the reading public as a whole. In this, as in his earlier books, he anticipates the changes and possibilities that our new institutional arrangements have to offer our poetics.

It is intriguing to consider that Lowell's radical embrace of revision means that on the level of writing process, he was a genuine "workshop poet"—that is, that the understanding of literary meaning and value that motivated his work was profoundly resonant with and probably shaped by the practices and possibilities of the workshop milieu. The rest of this chapter has argued that on the more abstract level of poetic self-fashioning, he should be seen as a genuine workshop poet as well. His concerns with the nature of vocational identity as it is enacted in institutions—as a set of gains and losses of charisma and authority—are not only powerful as poetic subject matter but also prescient in the way they anticipate the concerns of workshop practitioners who would follow in his footsteps.

But while Lowell can thus be read as a paradigmatic example of the workshop poet, he is also in other ways a singular figure. As his contemporaries frequently noted, his position within a hereditary social elite conferred significant privileges that set him apart from his peers—and also created unique problems. Born, in Bourdieu's terms, into symbolic capital—into "the certainty of possessing cultural legitimacy, and the ease which is the touchstone of excellence"—his acute discomfort with the workshop stems partially from an unusual level of access to the unschooled charisma of aristocracy. While poets of privileged backgrounds have continued to succeed in the workshop system (with Jorie Graham a prominent example today), the meritocratic and egalitarian potentials of the workshop are arguably a more important aspect of its history. Poets who had occasion to make use of the workshop as a means of access to literary culture performed acts of self-fashioning that balanced institutionality and charisma very differently.

The patriarchal model of literary transmission that structures Lowell's poetic self-fashioning was not only dependent on family and hereditary privilege, but also, more basically, on gender. In the next chapter, the cases of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton will show that the

agonies of vocational self-fashioning that Lowell encapsulated in his poems are far from universal. Although both Plath and Sexton, like Lowell, expressed significant ambivalence about the culture of the academic workshop, and although its practices and values affect their poems in complex ways, overall they were more able than Lowell to recognize the workshop as a source of opportunity and to approach the developing workshop culture with resourceful enthusiasm as well as trepidation. Plath's and Sexton's distinct practices of female authorship thus developed in dialogue not only with the workshop system itself but with the versions of poetic identity that it produced in Lowell and his male peers.

Notes to Chapter 2

¹ Robert Lowell, “National Book Award Acceptance Speech,” 1960. *National Book Foundation*. http://www.nationalbook.org/nbaacceptspeech_rlowell.html.

² Robert Von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture, 1945–1980* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

³ M.L. Rosenthal, “Poetry as Confession.” *The Nation* vol. 189 issue 8 (September 1959): 154–155.

⁴ Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems*, Frank Bidart and David Gewanter, eds (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 124.2

⁵ Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 140.

⁶ Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 173.

⁷ Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 140.

⁸ Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 140.

⁹ See TK. Condemnations of ivory tower etc.

¹⁰ Seidel, Frederick, “The Art of Poetry: Robert Lowell,” in *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, Jeffrey Meyers, ed. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 49.

¹¹ Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 125.

¹² For instance, see TK.

¹³ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 85.

¹⁴ Max Weber, “The Routinization of Charisma,” in *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building*, S.N. Eisenstadt, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

¹⁵ Weber, “Routinization,” 53.

¹⁶ Weber, “Routinization,” 58.

¹⁷ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁸ Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Lytle Shaw, *Frank O’Hara: the Poetics of Coterie* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2006).

¹⁹ Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies*, 10.

²⁰ Langdon Hammer, *Hart Crane & Allen Tate: Janus-Faced Modernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 213.

²¹ Quoted in Greg Barnhisel, *James Laughlin, New Directions, and the Remaking of Ezra Pound* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 50.

²² Pound was ambitious, through a variety of schemes, to expand his educational endeavors toward greater institutionalization. These efforts also coincided with his increasing fascination with Mussolini and his turn toward fascism.

²³ Robert Lowell, *The Letters of Robert Lowell*, Saskia Hamilton, ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 3–4.

²⁴ Lowell, *Letters*, 10.

²⁵ Seidel, “Interview,” in Meyers, ed, *Interviews and Memoirs*, 64.

²⁶ Seidel, “Interview,” in Meyers, ed, *Interviews and Memoirs*, 65.

²⁷ Lowell, *Letters*, 17.

²⁸ See Hammer, *Hart Crane & Allen Tate*, 8–9, for a discussion of professionalism as an “ideology of ‘merit’” in relation to Tate’s view of the university.

-
- ²⁹ See, for example, Alan Golding, *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 77–78.
- ³⁰ John Crowe Ransom, “Criticism, Inc.” (2007), in *Praising It New*, Garrick Davis, ed (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, May 13, 2008), 50.
- ³¹ Golding, *From Outlaw to Classic*, 71.
- ³² Ransom, “Criticism, Inc.,” 49.
- ³³ Golding, *From Outlaw to Classic*, 83.
- ³⁴ D.G. Myers, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (TK: Prentice Hall, 1996).
- ³⁵ John Crowe Ransom, “Mr. Tate and the Professors,” *Kenyon Review* Vol. 2, No. 3 (Summer, 1940), 348.
- ³⁶ John Crowe Ransom, “A Look Backwards and a Note of Hope,” in Meyers, *Interviews and Memoirs*, 175.
- ³⁷ Quoted in Paul Mariani, *Lost Puritan: A Life of Robert Lowell* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996).
- ³⁸ Ransom, “A Look Backward,” 175.
- ³⁹ Quoted in Mariani, *Lost Puritan*, 69.
- ⁴⁰ Lowell, *Letters*, 29.
- ⁴¹ Lowell, *Letters*, 25.
- ⁴² Lowell, *Letters*, 25s.
- ⁴³ Stephen Gould Axelrod, “Introduction,” in *The Critical Response to Robert Lowell*, Stephen Gould Axelrod, ed (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 1.
- ⁴⁴ Mariani, *Lost Puritan*, 88.
- ⁴⁵ Lowell, *Letters*, 30.
- ⁴⁶ Nick Halpern, *Everyday and Prophetic: The Poetry of Lowell, Ammons, Merrill, and Rich* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).
- ⁴⁷ Mariani, *Lost Puritan*, 93.
- ⁴⁸ Hammer, *Hart Crane & Allen Tate*, 9.
- ⁴⁹ Lowell, *Letters*, 3.
- ⁵⁰ Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 15–17.
- ⁵¹ Quoted in Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 859.
- ⁵² Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 17. Background on Walsingham from Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 1010, nVI.
- ⁵³ Quoted in Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 1010, nVI 2.8.
- ⁵⁴ Lowell, *Letters*, 43.
- ⁵⁵ Lowell, *Letters*, 38.
- ⁵⁶ Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 24.
- ⁵⁷ Lowell, *Letters*, 156.
- ⁵⁸ Helen Vendler, “Lowell in the Classroom,” in Meyers, *Interviews and Memoirs*, 288.
- ⁵⁹ Richard Tillinghast, “Robert Lowell in the Sixties,” in Meyers, *Interviews and Memoirs*, 265.
- ⁶⁰ Lowell, *Letters*, 258.
- ⁶¹ W. D. Snodgrass, “The Art of Poetry No. 68,” interviewed by Alexandra Eyle, *The Paris Review* No. 130 (Spring 1994).
- ⁶² Vendler, “Lowell in the Classroom,” in Meyers, *Interviews and Memoirs*, 296.
- ⁶³ Vendler, “Lowell in the Classroom,” in Meyers, *Interviews and Memoirs*, 297.
- ⁶⁴ Anne Sexton, “Classroom at Boston University,” in Meyers, *Interviews and Memoirs*, 179.

-
- ⁶⁵ Alan Williamson, "Robert Lowell: A Reminiscence," in Meyers, *Interviews and Memoirs*, 269.
- ⁶⁶ Seidel, "Interview," in Meyers, *Interviews and Memoirs*, 49.
- ⁶⁷ Seidel, "Interview," in Meyers, *Interviews and Memoirs*, 54.
- ⁶⁸ Marjorie Perloff, "Poètes Maudits of the Genteel Tradition: Lowell and Berryman," in Stephen Gould Axelrod and Helen Deese, eds., *Robert Lowell: Essays on the Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 99.
- ⁶⁹ Perloff, "Poètes Maudits," 113.
- ⁷⁰ Goddard Lieberman, "An Interview with the Author," in Meyers, *Interviews and Memoirs*, 107.
- ⁷¹ Lowell, *Letters*, 336.
- ⁷² Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 172–173.
- ⁷³ Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 174.
- ⁷⁴ The phrase "gracefully insane" is Anne Sexton's, from her poem about Lowell, "Elegy in the Classroom": Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 32. Alex Beam also used it as the title of a book about the hospital: *Gracefully Insane: Life and Death Inside America's Premier Mental Hospital* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003).
- ⁷⁵ Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 183.
- ⁷⁶ Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 187.
- ⁷⁷ Frank Bidart, "Introduction: 'You Didn't Write, You Rewrote'" in Lowell, *Collected Poems*, vii.
- ⁷⁸ Bidart, "You Didn't Write," xii.

3

Tone-deaf and Unteachable: Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Women in the Midcentury Workshop

If Robert Lowell's poetic responses to the workshop culture in which he found himself and his ambitions were particular in terms of class, family, and, especially, gender, the response of the two women poets who were his most famous students were no less so. Both Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton found that early in their careers, the institutions of literary professionalism could provide powerful opportunities to be taken seriously as poets. In this sense, both Plath and Sexton's examples help to illustrate the way that workshop culture can serve successfully as an engine of meritocracy and broadening access. At the same time, both poets also express many of the same ambivalences that Lowell himself articulates. But while for Lowell, the response to vocational routinization is primarily elegiac and the only alternative a non-viable nostalgia for a more powerful and authentic past, for both Plath and Sexton the specifics of female experience provide a counterpoint to institutionality that enhances rather than competes with it. Plath and Sexton begin to explore, then, the complex avenues of institutional self-fashioning that the workshop was beginning to encourage poets to develop. Their work points to ways that the tensions, paradoxes, and misrecognitions of the workshop can be used for poetic—and poetic-career—effect.

Introduction: *The Bell Jar*

Sylvia Plath's autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* attests in the most literal manner to the fact that for female poets the stakes of the workshop could sometimes feel like a matter of life and death. These stakes are embedded in the novel's plot: the event that leads directly to star student Esther Greenwood's suicide attempt is her rejected application to a prestigious summer fiction-

writing course. (The real-life analogue was a Harvard course taught by Frank O'Connor from which Plath was rejected in the summer of 1953.) After Esther has spent the first half of the novel as a summer intern at a women's magazine, the class, which "had stretched before me like a bright, safe bridge over the dull gulf of the summer,"¹ was to fill the second half of the summer before her senior year in college; in its absence, she is immediately overtaken by an aimless depression that quickly spirals into self-destruction. Esther's reaction to her rejection seems excessive, particularly because she has barely mentioned the class in the hundred or so preceding pages, and, as such, the intensity of her reaction is one of the novel's puzzles. But while it may seem to be merely a clumsy plot device that conveniently delivers Esther into a summer of boredom, or perhaps to be a detail included for autobiographical fidelity, the story of Esther's application to and rejection from the course can also be read as Plath's deliberate and astute commentary on the consequences for women of the midcentury institutionalization of literature.

Esther is a child of institutions, from the summer internship program of the novel's first half, to the college life in which she thrives, and finally to the mental hospital she finds herself in at the novel's end. Furthermore, these institutions shape, define, and bolster her fragile sense of identity as she tries to reconcile her conflicting ambitions and imagine and pursue success and happiness as a woman poet; thus, after her rejection removes this confirmation of identity, she pictures herself as an empty, dissociated "body in a white blouse and green skirt," and feels that "it was very important not to be recognized."² *The Bell Jar*, then, can be read as a story of increasing disillusionment with a culture of institutional self-fashioning, a story that Plath tells less to condemn this cultural landscape outright and more to explore it and to dramatize its psychological effects. In a positive sense, institutional self-fashioning is genuinely empowering in *The Bell Jar*, because it helps to define and stabilize identity and, in doing so, provides a

platform for legitimate agency and self-expression: as long as Esther is a student, she knows who she is, how to act, what to say. In the first half of the novel, Plath articulates this largely positive vision of institutionality and also depicts it as an engine of meritocracy and, counter-intuitively, as a means of charismatic self-determination. For a “scholarship girl” like Esther, institutions provide opportunities she would otherwise be denied; or, more precisely, they provide her with the means to earn these opportunities through hard work and natural excellence. In this sense, institutions, particularly the institutions of literary education, are not damaging to charisma, but instead seem to support it, with the ideology of meritocracy naturalizing the heroine’s rise through a series of successes so that this rise seems both inevitable and charismatically, irrationally inexplicable.

This dynamic also underlies Esther’s hopes for the summer writing class:

I’d applied for a summer school course with a famous writer where you sent in the manuscript of a story and he read it and said whether you were good enough to be admitted into the class . . . I decided I’d surprise [Magazine Editor] Jay Cee and send in a couple of stories I wrote in this class under a pseudonym. Then one day the Fiction Editor would come in to Jay Cee personally and plop the stories down on her desk and say, “Here’s something a cut above the usual,” and Jay Cee would agree and accept them and ask the author to lunch and it would be me.³

In this fantasy of institutional success, it is notable, almost comically so, how little for Esther the significance of this writing class has to do with any anticipation of actual learning. Her stories, in her fantasy, will be “a cut above” because of talent, not because of whatever rote or systematic learning could take place during a few weeks of summer school. Unlike the course in shorthand writing that Esther’s mother urges her to take, post-rejection, as a replacement, whose agreed-upon result would be that she would know how to use shorthand, Esther’s sense of the benefits of the fiction writing course does not involve knowledge, but instead has to do with vocational legitimacy. Acceptance to the course would provide validation, which would, as the fantasy

suggests, produce more acceptance and validation. Rejection, as the rest of the novel amply demonstrates, leads not only to disappointment and embarrassment, but to a dissolution of the self and of the “bright, safe bridge” by means of which the self can navigate the chaos of the world. More specifically, the writing class seems to be useful for providing an automatic, institutional legitimacy for the process of writing itself so that, for Esther, it would be possible to write without having to claim identity as an “author.” The act of taking the class itself would legitimize Esther’s identity as a writer while, in a recursive loop, the continual act of self-definition constituted by the amassing of a portfolio of completed stories, themselves legitimated by the workshop process, would continue to secure and stabilize her social identity as a writer.

Esther’s fantasy of submitting the story under a pseudonym, however, suggests how problematic it could be for a young woman to attempt to define her own literary vocation, even in fantasy. In a sense, Esther’s fantasy suggests that she hopes that the prestige of the writing class will actually make her someone else, someone an editor could view as a successful writer. It also suggests the instability of the fantasy and the limits to the institutional sources of vocational legitimacy that Esther hopes to claim. As Plath shows, Esther’s search for an institutional source of lyric authority requires her to separate herself from herself, to introduce division and multiplicity into her understanding of her own potential for authorship. In order to imagine herself as an author, in other words, Esther preemptively gives up the idea of whole or authentic self-expression, and while in her fantasy her divided self is dramatically reintegrated by Jay Cee’s recognition, this theatrical ending does not dispel the sense of division. It is not surprising, given this necessity of projection and division, that Esther’s fantasy involves writing fiction, with its assumption of perspectival multiplicity, rather than lyric poetry, with its

assumption of unity even within modernist fragmentation. In Plath's poetry, however, the same issues reappear and can be credited with her insistent explorations of authenticity and persona.

If we read Esther not only as an autobiographical stand-in for Plath but also as at least a somewhat representative young female poet of her generation, then Plath's depiction in *The Bell Jar* of literary institutionality as a locus for negotiations of identity is suggestive for understanding why workshop culture has served for women poets in particular as an occasion for an exploration of questions of personal subjectivity and lyric authority. This chapter examines the cases of Plath and her contemporary Anne Sexton to show that for these poets the academic institutionality represented by the poetry workshop occasioned a continuous process of textual, professional, and personal self-fashioning specifically *as women poets*. It argues that for both Plath and Sexton, the workshop setting provided both opportunities and challenges in the realm of lyric authority, and that both poets used academia as a backdrop against which to stage the dilemmas of female lyric authority and professional identity. In both Plath's and Sexton's work, the lyric authority granted by academic professionalism sometimes functions as a hard-won source of empowerment, and the poems reflect the energy of the breakthrough into professional status that women's academic acceptance represented. At the same time, however, the academic realm not only carries a taint of diminishing institutionality in Plath's and Sexton's poems, but also comes into conflict with other sources of authority that can be seen as more traditionally feminine: the charismatic irrational, the domestic, the maternal. As Plath and Sexton navigate these conflicts in their work, they use a variety of strategies to dramatize the dilemmas of female lyric authority at midcentury, strategies that recognizably define both their own distinctive poetics, including the Confessional, and also many of the traits associated with workshop poetry

in general: an undermining of the opposition between authenticity and performance, an insistence on the permeability of art and life, and the frequent appearance of the uncanny.

While their relationship to the workshop had much in common, however, Plath and Sexton also differed in ways that are illuminating not only for their own poetics but for an understanding of the way that workshop experience has been paradoxically both authorizing and inhibiting for later generations of students and teachers. Plath, who approached academia as the consummate insider and success story, explored, like Robert Lowell, the conflicts between institutionality and personal identity. For Plath, as we have already seen, the workshop represents a crystallization of the rich but problematic realization that in the face of cultural silencing, an ambitious woman poet must rely on institutions for the authority to speak at all, and suffer the consequences on the level of identity. For Sexton, who never graduated from college and approached literary academia with an outsider status both self and externally imposed, the workshop similarly represented both a legitimate training program—an open and straightforward path to authoritative status—and, ironically, a system in which her authority would always be marked as belated and inferior. Throughout her career, her relationship to the academic poetry establishment remained a live issue in Sexton’s work, reflected in her interviews, career moves, and personal actions as well as in her poetry and her teaching.

“First, Are You Our Sort of Person?”: Application and Identity

As *The Bell Jar* has already shown, Plath’s work reflects a clear emphasis on both the inevitability and the danger of institutional identity. Esther’s example demonstrates that among the foremost of these dangers is that institutions that can validate can also invalidate. To the extent that Esther’s sense of an authentic or stable self has been created through a series of

charismatic successes within institutions, that identity is vulnerable to the very capriciousness and impersonality that have nurtured it. At the same time, however, Plath roundly rejects the possibility of retreating to an authentic or personal identity that would be more “real” or stable than that conferred by institutional acceptance. The burden of modernity, she suggests, particularly for women, is that there is no stable ground of identity, only a shifting set of roles and requirements mediated equally by institutions even on personal and intimate levels. Esther’s rejection from the writing class is echoed in “The Applicant,” a poem from Plath’s final sequence, *Ariel*, in which the same processes of identity formation that Esther embraces in relation to her sense of self as a writer are applied to marriage and domesticity.⁴ In this poem, an unnamed bureaucratic authority seems to be evaluating a man’s fitness for marriage: “First, are you our sort of person?” the poem opens.⁵ Soon, however, as the poem describes and catalogues the attributes of the addressee’s potential wife, the addressee is revealed to be an empowered agent within the application process:

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
You have a hole, it's a poultice.
You have an eye, it's an image.
My boy, it's your last resort.
Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.

As the man is given the opportunity to make the choice “will you marry it, marry it, marry it?” the status of applicant shifts to the potential wife. Only referred to in the third person (usually as “it”), and figuratively disembodied and objectified over the course of the poem’s iterations (she is first a hand, then a suit, and finally a “living doll”), still the “she” gradually becomes the title character—the “applicant”—and thus the focus and protagonist of the poem.

The application process the poem describes, though fantastical, bears similarities to the one in which “you sent in the manuscript of a story and he read it and said whether you were

good enough to be admitted.” The applicant, like Esther, is required to anticipate the process by which she will be judged and adjust herself accordingly, while what the judgment will ultimately fall upon will not be any one characteristic or achievement but a general determination of “whether you were good enough.” The application process, then, is if not literally dismembering psychologically denaturing; it is about being shaped and used according to another’s needs, wants, visions. Furthermore, the bureaucratic designation of “applicant” ironically implies a degree of agency to the applicant’s participation in her own abjection, a willing ceding of identity and self-determination. In “The Applicant,” this process is particularly destructive because the applicant’s identity is fully defined by the process of application itself, by what she is willing and able to do, by the limits she places on herself and agrees to, including the willingness to “dissolve of sorrow” once her husband is dead. Despite the applicant’s submission, however, despite her complete subjugation of identity, her fate still rests in the hands of others; all that remains to her of individuality, in fact, is precisely that which is subject to judgment and rejection. A culture of “applications,” then, the poem implies, imposes a uniquely modern double bind, in which one must actively seek out, and claim false agency in regard to, one’s own subjugation.⁶

Although the poem suggests that the application process—the institutionalization of private identity—is so destructive because it reduces identity to the disembodied attributes of a bureaucratic checklist, the poem is clear, as is *The Bell Jar*, that no solution to the problem it describes can be found in a prior sense of authenticity or wholeness. Esther’s identity, even at its most functional, involved conflicting visions of self held together largely by naïveté; the applicant has no self at all outside of the process of application and the role for which she is applying. While for Plath authentic identity is not possible or even interesting, however, “The

Applicant” does suggest that power and authority can be sought instead in an appropriation or ventriloquization of the controlling institutions and bureaucracy. In “The Applicant,” this literally takes the form of speaking in the voice of the imaginary agency. As the “she” becomes the poem’s subject, this generates the poem’s driving irony, especially in the context of the other poems of *Ariel*; as readers, we are forced to imagine the perspective of the “she” who is judged, while also remaining aware, despite her ability to “talk talk talk,” of her silencing. It is easy to discount this ironic ventriloquization: in context it seems obvious that we as readers should align our sympathies with the “she,” and not with the poem’s literal speaker. To do so, however, is to ignore much of the complexity of this and other “Confessional” poems: by dividing the poem’s sensibility between the applicant and the agent, Plath asks us to understand both perspectives, both those who are empowered within institutions and those who are subject to them, suggesting as she does so that these sensibilities are not so separate after all. As the poem creates and instantiates the imaginary marriage broker, it suggests that the authority of institutions is charismatic and linguistic as well as predetermined and patriarchal. The multiplicity and indeterminacy of identity that troubles Esther can also be configured as flexibility and a flair for performance and impersonation—for the qualities, in other words, of a poetic voice distinctive in its very ability to question and disturb distinctions of identity.

“In the Thin Classroom”: Robert Lowell’s Workshop

Plath and Sexton met in Robert Lowell’s Boston University workshop in the winter of 1959. This course represented a remarkable real-time encounter of three poetic figures destined to spend their posterities grouped together in critical studies, anthologies, and syllabi, and whose work is remembered as closely related (even if, among the three, only Sexton was at all eager to actually

assert this relationship). Neither Plath nor Sexton was enrolled at Boston University; both were older than the typical college student and were auditing the class on an informal basis while also attending to family responsibilities at home. Both had also begun publishing in journals and were writing the poems that would constitute their first books, Plath's *The Colossus* and Sexton's *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. Lowell was working on what would become *Life Studies*; according to another student in the class, he often brought in drafts of his new poems to share with the group.⁷ Exactly what this experience meant to the poets involved, and what influence it had on their poems and the evolving "Confessional" style that was to unite them, is almost impossible to glimpse in accounts of this workshop, distorted as they are by time, fame, and death. By all accounts, the relationships were uneasy and the vectors of influence crisscrossing and multidirectional. "They were somber, formidably expert in stanza structure, and had a flair for alliteration and Massachusetts's low-tide dolor . . . somehow none of it sank very deep into my awareness," Lowell wrote of Plath's workshop poems in his foreword to *Ariel*.⁸ Plath wrote in her journal, "He sets me up with Ann [sic] Sexton, an honor, I suppose. Well, about time."⁹

Beyond the impacts the poets may have had on each others' particular poems, and beyond debates over who influenced whom, however, what is important is that the most substantive and extended encounter between these three leading "Confessional" poets took place in a university workshop, with its particular constraints and procedures on the page and its complex extra-textual dynamics, a confluence that would have been unimagined just a generation earlier. For Plath and Sexton, two extraordinarily ambitious young female poets, the choice to attend Lowell's workshop was an obvious but complicated one. Like the course that Plath's Esther hoped to attend, this writing class with a famous author offered both opportunities and challenges on the level of vocational identity and writerly self-fashioning, in addition to

whatever insights might be offered directly through the poetic pedagogy that Lowell delivered, according to Plath, in a “mildly feminine ineffectual fashion,”¹⁰ and according to Sexton, in a “rather awkward” manner and a voice frustratingly “soft and slow.”¹¹ Lowell’s fame, influence, and prestige made his acquaintance valuable in itself both materially and psychically; as with Esther’s hopes for her course, Lowell’s acceptance and approval could confer a powerful sense of legitimacy and authorization. By 1959 the workshop had presented itself as a venue in which such legitimation could be straightforwardly, meritocratically sought, without recourse to the kind of informal network that often remained closed to women. At the same time, 1959 was also early enough that it was still possible to join a prestigious workshop on an informal basis, and it is worth noting that both Plath and Sexton were “early adopters” of the workshop system who correctly understood it as a newly emerging path to a poetic vocation. Not only did this path require sacrifices, however, it was also complicated because the way was led not by Esther’s generic “famous writer” but by the actual Robert Lowell, who was himself struggling in public with the limitations and responsibilities of a public persona of professorial authority.

Sexton’s first book includes a poem that deals explicitly with Lowell’s workshop, a poem whose very existence suggests the urgency for Sexton of addressing and controlling the meaning of her experience as Lowell’s student. The poem, “Elegy in the Classroom,” recounts an incident in which, according to Sexton’s friend Kathleen Spivack, who was also a member of the class, Lowell

seemed agitated, [and] we had the distinct fear that he was going to throw himself out the window. The class sat completely hushed. Anne fixed me firmly with her green eyes, as if to communicate something. Lowell hospitalized himself directly after this class meeting.¹²

This striking image of Sexton’s green-eyed stare, composed and confident, silent but full of latent meaning, echoes the way Sexton’s poem represents the subjectivity of the workshop

participant. To be a student in a workshop, the poem suggests, entails silence, passivity, a deferral of power, thinking more than can be said—a situation, in other words, in which the interior and exterior experience do not match. In the poem, Sexton dramatizes not only the poignancy of Lowell's public suffering from his mental illnesses, but also the poignancy of her own need to find an appropriate vantage on the situation, mingling the sympathy of a social equal and fellow sufferer and the admiration and competitiveness of a professional subordinate.

Insofar as the poem, making public his moment of vulnerability in a semi-private venue, represents an aggressive gesture toward Lowell, it seems that this unkindness itself is an act of authorial self-fashioning for Sexton, an attempt to take ownership of her own status as a famous poet's student and to characterize in her own terms the acts of learning and literary transmission that went on in the classroom. The death that has occasioned this elegy is perhaps not Lowell's—he was alive and well when the poem was written and published—but the death of Sexton's own silenced status as a subordinate and student. Here is the poem in its entirety:

In the thin classroom, where your face
was noble and your words were all things,
I find this boily creature in your place;

find you disarranged, squatting on the window sill,
irrefutably placed up there,
like a hunk of some big frog
watching us through the V
of your woolen legs.

Even so, I must admire your skill.
You are so gracefully insane.
We fidget in our plain chairs
and pretend to catalogue
our facts for your burly sorcery

or ignore your fat blind eyes
or the prince you ate yesterday
who was wise, wise, wise.¹³

This poem is typical of Sexton not only in its disclosure of biographical moments of intensity and vulnerability, but also in its use of fairy tale imagery and its emphasis on transformation, metamorphosis, and the instability and multiplicity of identity. In a simplistic retelling, the poem tells a version of the “Frog Prince” fairy tale occurring in reverse; Lowell’s manic episode turns him from a prince to a frog, from a “noble” image to a frightening “boily creature,” and the poem documents the disorientation and disappointment that results from witnessing the weakness of an admired mentor. But the poem resists simplistic sorting of its elements into the binary oppositions upon which the fairy tale narrative is based, and as soon as it has suggested that we might separate Lowell into “noble face” and “boily creature” it begins to collapse the distinction between these two incarnations. Sexton does this through the poetic mode of direct address; while it might be more comfortable to understand this breakdown as an aberrant deviation from a more “real” Lowell, some takeover by the external other of illness which can be understood as separate from the “real” self, the poem addresses both Lowells—all potential Lowells—with the continual, consistent, unifying “you.”

This focus on the problem of unitary identity, the failed attempt to divide Lowell into separable parts, recalls Plath’s similar treatment of Esther and the “she” of “The Applicant.” Further, the staging of this breakdown in the poetry workshop classroom suggests that for Sexton, as for Plath, the workshop is a scene in which such transformations are natural. Lowell’s inability to inhabit a single self—a single “you”—between the prince and frog suggests that the performative nature of classroom interaction, particularly teaching, is continuous with the dislocations of identity that are both psychologically troubling and central to the creative act. Sexton’s portrayal of Lowell as both prince and frog, simultaneously and ungracefully, despite what the poem claims, suggests that she understands both mental illness and creative charisma as

fundamentally linked to the performances of the classroom. Poetry is madness, and teaching is both.

It is also important that Sexton chooses to depict this moment through the mediating narrative of a fairy tale. As fairy tales are associated with children and with irrational, mystical folkways, they can be seen as a distinctively feminine area of cultural knowledge. Sexton's casting of Lowell in her own fairy-tale production appears as a move that asserts her own alternative source of authority in contrast to the academic knowledge that supposedly justified Lowell's own presence in the classroom. This is only one instance of Sexton's frequent use of fairy tale tropes, particularly those of witches and other wise women. It suggests the charisma of the uncanny, the prophetic and transformative voice that threatens the male sphere of authority. Furthermore, the protagonist and empowered agent of the story of the Frog Prince is not the royal amphibian, but the princess whose kiss transforms him; Sexton's use of the story not only shifts the sense of authorial perspective from Lowell to herself, but also sexualizes the relationship, presenting a vision in which female sexuality has the power to determine male identity.

These dynamics are complicated further, however, by the complexity of address in the poem, which shows not only Sexton's commentary on the workshop in general and its relation to Lowell, but also the way that her own position within it affected her sense of identity and lyric authority. The poem's address to Lowell as "you" is equalizing, in the sense that it is familiar, and empowering because it literally gives Sexton control of Lowell's actions and the reader's perception of him. At the same time, however, the poem's use of pronouns indicate that the speaker is not empowered to act as an individual except internally, in terms of her perception; in action, she must suppress her individual reactions and can only be part of a collective: "I find"

the boily creature” and “I must admire your skill,” but “we fidget in our plain chairs” and “[we] pretend to catalogue our facts / for your burly sorcery.” This recalls Spivack’s descriptions of Sexton’s knowing passivity in the class: “Anne fixed me firmly with her green eyes” and, earlier, discussing Sexton’s relationship with Plath, “There were times in Lowell’s classes when the two women exchanged knowing glances and withdrew into themselves.”¹⁴ It suggests a contrast between an internal sense of personal authority and an enforced subordinate position, a contrast that makes a relation even of admiration fraught with ambivalence.

Sexton’s knowing but silent exchange with Plath also recalls the story, much recounted by Sexton, of the way that she and Plath and another auditor, George Starbuck (widely known to have been her lover at the time), would proceed after class to the Ritz, where, over martinis, the two women would lovingly compare suicide attempts. Sexton’s sense that the world of poetry was outside of the ordinary structures of society—that she and her poet-companions could, at will, ignore the rule-bound world of which the classroom is an imperfect but powerful extension—is also reflected in her apparently habitual practice of parking in a loading zone in front of the bar, and declaring that they were, after all, there to get loaded.¹⁵

Discreet Academies: Plath’s Academia

Despite having grown up less than ten miles from each other, Plath and Sexton came to Lowell’s B.U. workshop from divergent backgrounds that meant that the workshop experience was useful and challenging to them in different ways. Plath, whose life story closely mirrors the experiences she created for Esther, was by 1959 a practiced and disillusioned veteran of the academic-literary establishment. Not only had she been, like Esther, a star student, she had also spent the previous year teaching literature at her own alma mater, Smith College. In her role as a teacher, Plath had

devoted considerable thought to the relation between poetry and academia and had observed the effects of classroom teaching and university culture on her own creative life. She came to Lowell's workshop with an ambivalent set of conclusions; on the one hand, she noted difficulties maintaining her own poetic output while teaching, but on the other, she had deepened her understanding of the classroom as a site for the uptake of literary values and the experience of literary pleasure and insight. As with her own student experiences, Plath's experiences as a teacher confirmed, in other words, that the classroom is an important scene of reading, one in which both sophisticated and satisfying relationships with literature can be attained.¹⁶

At the same time, Plath's early poems register a serious ambivalence toward academia as a scene for poetic self-fashioning. Plath most directly explores the complexity of academic identity in the 1958 poem "Above the Oxbow." This poem is about the view from Mount Holyoke, a 935-foot peak in Hadley, Massachusetts, that overlooks the Pioneer Valley and an oxbow formed by the Connecticut River. Plath also wrote a short story of the same name about the same landscape, also in 1958; the story was published posthumously in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*.¹⁷ The poem presents this physical landscape as an extended metaphor for the poetic ambitions that might be possible within it and its cultural analogues:

Here in this valley of discreet academies
We have not mountains, but mounts, truncated hillocks
To the Adirondacks, to northern Monadnock,
Themselves mere rocky hillocks to an Everest.
Still, they're out best mustering of height: by
Comparison with the sunken silver-grizzled
Back of the Connecticut, the river-level
Flats of Hadley farms, they're lofty enough
Elevations to be called something more than hills.¹⁸

"Above the Oxbow" has the feel of student work in the sense that it is discursive rather than energized by the dramatic acts of address that imbue the *Ariel* poems with the intensity for which

Plath is generally remembered. The poem is also dutifully informed by education in prosody, composed of four fourteen-line blank-verse stanzas that make a knowing reference to the sonnet form. "Above the Oxbow" also presents an engagement with the Romantic trope of the sublime as represented by the view from a mountaintop, and, further, of this view as a privileged position of lyric subjectivity. Plath's poem is in dialogue with this trope as it appears, for example, in Shelley and Wordsworth. She sets Mt. Holyoke alongside Mont Blanc and Snowden Peak to consider the idea not only of the overwhelming and disorienting power and majesty of nature but also that it is the poet's task to mediate both physically (through actual mountaineering) and spiritually between the intensity and enormity of this sublimity and the world that can be tolerated by ordinary existence.

As it references and reworks this tradition, Plath's poem is transparently an *ars poetica* of sorts, a meditation on poetic ambition and the relevance of Romantic tropes of sublimity applied to the world in which she found herself writing, the "valley of discreet academies" where "truncated hillocks" are only "lofty enough." The poem, then, is an explicit act of poetic self-fashioning in relation to a poetic culture dependent on the university, an assessment of poetic ambition in the diminished world of these "discreet academies." As the first lines quoted above indicate, the poem stresses the modesty of this world; so unimpressive are these mountains that the poem spends several lines seeking an appropriately humble term for them, eventually settling on "something more than hills." Allegorically speaking, the poem suggests that the right response to a poetic culture of "discreet academies" is a sense of perspective and decorum, an acknowledgement of a need to work on a smaller scale and an appreciation of the different possibilities of this less sublime world. Even not-quite-mountains must be climbed and lesser poetic peaks are still worth scaling:

To people who live in the bottom of valleys
A rise in the landscape, hummock or hogback, looks
To be meant for climbing.

The poem seems to be calling, then, for a comparable downgrading of poetic ambition, a call for a poetics whose ambitions are local and relative rather than universal.

What is interesting, however, is that when the poem, using a “we” that seems to encompass both a speaker and her hiking companion(s) and the collective consciousness of the inhabitants of the valley, finally reaches the mountaintop, the payoff is still figured in terms that recall the Romantic sublime. “We” are still able to achieve the perspectival disorientation and revelation that makes mountain views so valuable to poets: “the clear conversion at the top,” can

Dislodge our cramped concept of space, unwall
Horizons beyond vision, spill vision
After the horizons, stretching the narrowed eye
To full capacity.

The poem, in other words, does not in fact suggest an alternative to the “poet-on-a-mountaintop” model of inspiration and lyric authority but rather seems to accept and attempt to recreate it. In doing so it stages the contrast between this model and its own opening assertions, the decorum and perspective that has led the poem to stress at some length the modesty of its own inspirational material. The poem, then, leaves open to interpretation the question of whether the revelation should be read as genuine, whether the type of poetic revelation that dislodges, unwalls, spills, and stretches is truly possible on such a small mountain and in such a belated culture.

As the poem’s description continues, Plath begins to complicate the contrast between the modesty of the valley and the ambition of the mountain, in ways that are intriguingly tied to gender. The speaker notices, first, that the institutional and commercial world is creeping into the sublime, as on the mountaintop a state-parks ticket-taker charges for admission and hawks

beverages. This encroachment of the world of boundaries onto nature is also the explicit concern of Plath's short story "Above the Oxbow," in which a young woman on a hike is excessively upset by the need to pay admission to reach the mountaintop.¹⁹ Narrated from the point of view of the ticket-taker, the story contrasts the female hiker's reaction with that of her male companion, suggesting that her distress is in some sense a gendered response to the narrowing of access: the act of gate-keeping before nature appears to her to be a sinister and infuriating development in a way that mystifies both the ticket-taker and her boyfriend. The literal placement of a monetary value onto the scene calls the emotional and ethical value of the sublime vision from the mountain into question; to charge money, the story implies, is to make explicit the fact that such visions are never truly universal but are always involved in systems of privileged access and exchange. The story's irony is that the female hiker's recognition of this truth renders her unsympathetic, even hysterical; even the narrative voice of the story itself does not align with or even understand her. To the extent that the story illustrates the predicament of the woman artist, then, the problem is not only limited access to the supposedly "universal" modes, but also the absence of a language in which to express or communicate this limitation.

In the poem "Above the Oxbow," a similar set of issues is figured on the metaphorical level of landscape description. The speaker begins to note that the way that the mountain-top perspective abstracts the life below:

A ruddy skylight paints the gray oxbow
And paints the river's pale circumfluent stillness
As roses broach their carmine in a mirror. Flux
Of the desultory currents—all that unique
Stipple of shifting wave-tips is ironed out, lost
In the simplified orderings of sky-
Lorded perspectives. Maplike, the far fields are ruled
By correct green lines and no seedy free-for-all
Of asparagus heads. Cars run their suave

Colored beads on the strung roads, and the people stroll
Straightforwardly across the springing green.
All's peace and discipline down there.

In these lines, then, the landscape is abstracted into art, not only by way of the direct and repeated use of the word “paints” but also through the painterly description of the poem itself, with its carefully formed series of visual observations. And while this abstraction is beautiful, it is also both false, in the way that it fails to represent the “free-for-all” of actual life, and tyrannical, because it irons, lords, disciplines, and rules “by correct green lines.”

The kind of artistic abstraction that can be accessed on mountaintops, then, Plath suggests, is problematic not only because the mountaintops that happen to be close at hand are inadequate to the task—not only, allegorically speaking, because we live in an age of “discreet academies” rather than heroic individuals—but also because this kind of abstraction assumes straightforwardness and irons out difference. The language of violence and authoritarianism, further, suggests that this aesthetic abstraction poses an ethical problem as well as an artistic one. Plath complained in journals and letters that her mastery of the kind of artistic abstraction the poem enacts won her praise in workshops and courses, suggesting that the workshop method rewards ethically problematic mastery and fails to recognize the limits of technical excellence—a common criticism of the workshop. This also suggests Plath’s own ongoing struggle to move beyond the “peace and discipline” of the well-wrought poem, inadequate to the complexity of experience as she wanted to record it. Writing in a journal of her frustration with Lowell’s inability to “see what I am working at, overcoming. How ironic, that all my work to overcome my easy poeticisms merely convinces them that I am rough, antipoetic, unpoetic. My God,”²⁰ she suggests the fraught relationship of these aesthetic questions to matters of vocational recognition and authority.

While these issues are not explicitly gendered in the poem, the poem's natural imagery suggests sexual difference, and the ambivalent opposition between the "free-for-all" of earthly life and the beautiful abstractions of mountaintops is consonant with the complex of ideas about gender and poetic success that Plath expressed elsewhere. Its insistence on the importance of perspectival multiplicity—of the inadequacies of the mountaintop view—are consonant with elements in her portrayal of Esther and in her poems that suggest that a resistance to unitary conclusions is, for her, a defining aspect of her female identity. It is suggestive, then, that this poem was written around the same time that Plath was deciding that the academic life would not be the one for her (a decision that she treated, however, like all of her life plans, as subject to revision, and that she might well have been reversed had she lived). This decision was related, in important ways, to her sense of her own identity as a woman, and to her emerging sense that domesticity could present an alternative source of authority that was potentially more vital and powerful than the mountaintop perspective of the university.

Classrooms and Kitchens: Sexton's Poetic Education

In contrast to Plath's, Sexton's career is a case study in the collision of workshop professionalism and the charismatic potential of the amateur and unschooled. In a strange memorial piece written after Sexton's 1974 suicide, Lowell, describing her presence in his B.U. workshop, highlights her embodiment of these tensions:

Anne was lean-faced, white-armed, thirty, and a poet for only a few months. She had met Snodgrass that summer and become a "confessional" poet overnight. How many laborious, often useless, steps of apprenticeship she had bypassed. Unlike Snodgrass and Sylvia Plath, she was an amateur. I am not sure I know what I mean by this.²¹

This statement (written, it is worth noting, after Sexton had been a “professional” poet for more than two decades), gives insight not only into Sexton’s experiences and attitudes but also into the set of ambivalences regarding literary education in relation to which she had to position herself. Lowell’s qualified admiration expresses a strong undertone of suspicion about Sexton’s legitimacy as a poet, suggesting that it may be unconsidered, unearned, intrinsically lesser. To become a poet “overnight,” to have been a poet “for only a few months” subtly undermines the sense of possessing what is, after all, generally considered less an assumed title than a personal quality, a lifelong vocation. Lowell also couches Sexton’s amateurism in unquestionably gendered and sexual terms with the physical description that begins his statement (unimaginable about a male poet), a pair of compound adjectives that do little to help us visualize Sexton’s actual appearance but fully convey that this appearance registered sensually. In Lowell’s eyes, then, Sexton’s nonacademic amateurism, her presence as a physical woman, and her power as a poet were all inextricably linked. He goes on to more explicitly praise her work in the same terms: “She did what few did, cut a figure.”

Lowell’s description would hardly have come as a surprise to Sexton herself, as the conflation of these same elements was an active component of her own poetic self-fashioning professionally, socially, and on the page. Sexton arrived in Lowell’s class acutely conscious of her lack of formal schooling (she had eloped at nineteen and her higher education consisted of a year of “finishing school” and a course in modeling), but she also had an ability to position this background not only as something to be overcome but also as something that she could use. Sexton’s efforts to establish herself in the setting of the workshop reflect an understanding that the academic professionalism represented by Lowell and his teaching formed the backdrop against which her poetic identity would take shape and definition. In this context, her feminine

amateurism carried with it the risk of inviting condescension, of signaling a limited horizon of ambition, of relegation to, as Lowell puts it later in the same remembrance, the status of “a fifties Edna Millay,” but it could also be a strength. In a letter to Lowell, seeking admission to his class, Sexton herself can be seen planting the seeds of the attitudes Lowell expressed years later:

I am more than a little shy of the great factories of humanity, like B.U. and it will take considerable moral courage to get on with this complicated application, registration and these new hurdles. Somewhere, I hope I will get to a classroom where Robert Lowell is talking about poetry.²²

Here Sexton positions herself as hapless and humble, but beyond that she also draws a subtle distinction between her simple straightforward humanity and the impersonal “factory” of the university, a distinction that redounds implicitly in her favor. Most importantly, as she would continue to do, she suggests that poets and poetry have the capacity to transcend the world of bureaucratic “hurdles,” even as they exist within them.

From the beginning, then, Sexton was a careful curator of the narrative of her own autodidacticism. As her biographer Diane Wood Middlebrook writes, “Sexton always claimed that her career had the shape of a story,”²³ and it is worth noting that what Middlebrook identifies as the locus of this literary potential is not her life as a whole but her *career*. This career story is integral to Sexton’s literary persona, a meta-narrative that informs and energizes her work on the page and helps to connect her poems’ psychological and domestic subjects to wider cultural currents. The conflicts her career embodies—the disturbed categories of amateur and professional, institutional and charismatic, which inflect Lowell’s reminiscence—also become themes in her work whose import goes beyond Sexton’s own biographical circumstances. Staging her own lyric persona as marginalized, she speaks for other marginalized voices. But rather than simply either embracing her hard-won entry into the world of literary professionalism, on the one hand, or rejecting that world in favor of the charisma of the outsider,

on the other, Sexton maintains a persona that is complex and indeterminate. In this sense, her career narrative enables her to mobilize and set in relief the conflicting powers of institutional legitimacy and charismatic otherness, particularly that of the feminine and domestic spheres.

The story of Sexton's career begins with an explicit contrast between professionalism and the lack thereof, as poetry rescues her from a literal and psychic captivity within the life of a suburban wife and mother. She describes this captivity and the mental illness that was her immediate reaction to it in a *Paris Review* interview:

Until I was twenty-eight I had a kind of a buried self who didn't know she could do anything but make white sauce and diaper babies. I didn't know I had any creative depths. I was a victim of the American Dream, the bourgeois, middle-class dream. All I wanted was a little piece of life, to be married, to have children . . . But one can't build little white picket fences to keep nightmares out. The surface cracked when I was about twenty-eight. I had a psychotic break and tried to kill myself.²⁴

As part of her psychiatric treatment, Sexton goes on to explain, her doctor encouraged her to seek mental stimulation by watching educational programs on public television, where she happened to see a segment in which I.A. Richards introduced and explained the sonnet. Although she had not written since high school, she decided to try the form herself, found the exercise worthwhile, and continued on and, in storybook fashion, recognition and a career soon followed.

However, Sexton's own narrative of her career does not claim her success as self-propelling; instead, Sexton emphasizes her hard work and also—as a sign of her seriousness—her swift engagement with a variety of institutions of formal education, starting with Richards's educational broadcast and moving on through Lowell's workshop, literature courses at Brandeis University with Philip Rahv and others, work with children in public schools, and finally to honorary degrees and her own university teaching career. One of the earliest and most important of these experiences was Sexton's first workshop, as she tells the *Paris Review*:

After I'd been writing about three months, I dared to go into the poetry class at the Boston Center for Adult Education taught by John Holmes. I started in the middle of the term, very shy, writing very bad poems, solemnly handing them in for eighteen others in the class to hear. . . . The most important aspect of that class as that I felt I belonged somewhere. . . . I found I belonged to the poets, that I was *real* there, and I had another "These are my people."²⁵

The importance for Sexton of this workshop is well-documented; her lifelong working friendship with poet Maxine Kumin began in that class, and her conflicts with Holmes about the appropriate level of disclosure in personal poetry helped her to define her own "Confessional" practices, a process she records in the poem "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Inquire Further." Sexton's description of her entry into the Holmes workshop also gives insight into the centrality of the workshop setting in Sexton's story of finding her poetic voice. Tellingly, her account of the Holmes class, above, has much the same structure as her letter to Lowell: just as she envisions the bureaucratic and off-putting university revealing at its center a simple "classroom where Robert Lowell is talking about poetry," in her account of the Holmes workshop the intimidating formality and judgment *of* the classroom is transcended by the affirming sociality of poetry enabled *by* the classroom. The workshop is enabling, as Sexton describes it, because it balances and mitigates the rigors of a literary life, of public intellectualism, while also providing a structure that make it possible to encounter and engage these rigors.

If the story of Sexton's career is a story of educational institutions, however, it is also worth noting that these institutions are different in character from those that shaped the careers of both Lowell and Plath. Rather than an elite college, or a college at all, Sexton's self-directed poetic education took place through institutions of amateurism and public access. Unlike the by-application-only writing course from which Esther is rejected, the institutions that informed and legitimated Sexton's early poetic efforts—public educational television and an adult education course—are not only available to all, but are explicitly intended as organs of popularization.

Emphasizing these institutions, Sexton recasts the relationship between education and literary vocation that troubled Lowell in *Life Studies*, softening the elitist connotations of higher education and embracing the idea of authentic self-actualization that was the promise of educational progressivism. Exaggerating her own ignorance, Sexton also implicitly valorizes poetic education itself: if a poet of her stature began the Holmes workshop writing “very bad poems,” then the education she received there must have been of real value. And while Sexton’s account rests to some degree on the assumption that this education only boosted what was a preexisting natural poetic talent, it also credits education with allowing that talent to flourish as it otherwise might not have, both by means of its pedagogical content and through the sense of legitimation that it provided. The education of the workshop, in Sexton’s account, then, does not reduce the charisma of her natural voice, but rather provides the situation and the tools that make charismatic expression possible at all.

This narrative of educational self-improvement is powerful partly because of its democratic underpinnings; Sexton’s path, it implies, could be followed by anyone, and talent and drive, not pedigree or access, shine through as the mark of poetic vocation. It is not surprising, then, that Sexton encouraged the frequent shorthand description of her career with the phrase “from housewife to poet,” a choice of words which itself suggests a number of the latent complexities of Sexton’s poetic identity and of the gendered assumptions of the literary culture she positioned herself within. With its implicit dynamics of transformation and breakthrough, the phrase posits “poet” and “housewife” as opposite terms. This is noteworthy in part because it suggests that the status of “housewife” provides a somewhat unique foil for poetic self-fashioning, in contrast to other potential demands on a poet’s time and attention: the careers of Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, for example, are never described as journeys

“from insurance executive to poet” or “from obstetrician to poet” (nor would such descriptions be accurate). Sexton’s narrative is also noteworthy because its suggestion that becoming a poet is a move from the private sphere into public and professional life elides poetry’s own indeterminate and emotionally vexed relationship to professionalism and the threat that overt careerism often poses to poetic charisma. The starting point of “housewife,” its very modesty, it seems, allows Sexton to position professionalism itself as a poetic breakthrough.

To make this point more generally, the story of Sexton’s career also gives a sense of narrative and dramatic consequence to very fact of her poems’ existence at all. As a “housewife” whose position of poetic legitimacy was far from assured, Sexton had to find a mode of expression that authorized itself, that contained enough charismatic energy to break through the barriers of gendered and professional expectations that would suggest that her writing would not be valid. For Sexton, the search for this mode of expression, and its ultimate fulfillment anew in each successful poem, is itself a powerful undercurrent in her early books and it lends an urgency and importance to the acts of expression within them. The many poems in her first collection that are acts of direct address to male authority figures emphasize this struggle for lyric authority. While the acts of address in these poems (which include two addressed to teachers, “Elegy in the Classroom” and “For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further”) all serve individual purposes, they also as a group convey the sense of a speaker whose words, to be important and even to exist at all, must be sanctioned by the listening ear of a male authority. It is particularly striking that Sexton opens her book with two successive versions of this gesture: the first poem is titled, and also begins, “You, Doctor Martin”; the next is titled “Kind Sir: These Woods,” and also begins “Kind Sir.” Both of these addresses involve an emotionally resonant combination of politeness and aggression, the respectful use of titles (“Doctor,” “Sir”) counterbalanced by the

sense that an indifferent addressee must be compelled into attention. The world of male authority, then, including that of classrooms and degrees, was a necessary and enabling foil for the breakthrough narrative that each of Sexton's poems could be said implicitly to embody. These poems, and her persona overall, needed to maintain the sense that, unlike her "professional" and more educated peers, whose work had the advantages of self-assurance, of an understood and accepted right to speak, a position of lyric authority, for Sexton this right to speak was uncertain, and thus hard-won, exciting, and important. And, as Lowell's after-the-fact skepticism partially attests, this was at least partially true.

Furthermore, Sexton's self-ballyhooed academic deficiencies also allowed her a flexible access to the status of amateur at a time when professionalism was becoming a problematic nexus of ambivalence in poetic culture, when poets were dividing themselves and their readerships between "cooked" and "raw." As a credential-free bonafide amateur herself, Sexton could not only avoid the taint of elitism but could also imagine and assert an audience of others like her. This partially explains her close correspondences with fans and her interest in the showmanship of public readings, her avowed intentions to bring poetry to new audiences. However, these are still professional activities; rather than rejecting or failing to reach poetic professionalism, as Lowell's introduction suggests she did, Sexton's relationship with it was a far more complicated push and pull, in which she sought professional legitimation while also calling into question the categories that made such legitimation attractive and necessary. For example, Sexton pursued literary relationships and community—more cynically, she networked—remarkably early in her writing career, using, in many cases, the institutions of amateurism but conducting herself as a professional. She attended courses and conferences and, observing a correspondence between her work and that of W.D. Snodgrass, sought him out as a

mentor. She also sought unusually early the ultimate legitimation of publication. In an interview, she answered the question “When did you start taking yourself seriously as a poet?”

I think when I was published. After I’d been writing for about a year and a half I started sending things to magazines, and collecting rejection slips. I wasted a lot of time on it. There were kind of two sides to me. One part was writing poems very seriously and the other was running this little fool’s business, which meant I will send out my poems today to four magazines and the mail will bring five or six poems back.²⁶

These professionalization efforts were not, as Sexton claims, a “fool’s business,” but were a part of her wider project both to use poetry as a means of establishing an identity outside the household and to examine that effort within the poetry itself. As her poetry, especially her early work, examined the contrasts between public and private, amateur and professional, female and male, modes of meaning and authority by staging the contrasts between them that she embodied within her own life and career, she was able to suggest that poetry could be a bridge between or synthesis of these two modes, and to position herself as a figure who could move between them and complicate their categories. Sexton’s narrative of amateurism was also important because it allowed her to contrast the academic knowledge and prestige she lacked with what she asserted as an alternative locus of authority, a persona connected to domesticity, to the everyday, and to the traditionally—i.e. 1950s—feminine.

These threads come together in a poem from *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, “Portrait of an Old Woman on the College Tavern Wall.” In this poem, Sexton contrasts the point of view of “poets” with that of the portrait who has silently watched generations of these poets come and go:

Oh down at the tavern
the children are singing
around their round table
and around me still.
Did you hear what it said?

. . .

I only said
how I want to be there and I
would sing my songs with the liars
and my lies with all the singers.
And I would, and I would but
it's my hair in the hair wreath,
my cup pinned to the tavern wall,
my dusty face they sing beneath.
Poets are sitting in my kitchen.
Why do these poets lie?
Why do children get children and
Did you hear what it said?

I only said
how I want to be there,
Oh, down at the tavern
where the prophets are singing
around their round table
until they are still.²⁷

It is important for the dynamics of this poem that its setting is a college; at college, the poem implies, the title of poet comes easily, based on songs and lies and requiring, as far as the poem seems to attest, no actual writing. At college, too, the students, poets included, are young enough to be called children. The poem contrasts the easy vocational confidence of these lying student poets with the broader but more constrained perspective of the portrait, who, despite her own prowess at symbolism and meaning-making (her cup, her hair) and her ability to narrate the poem itself, is denied both the title of poet and the pleasurable sociality of the community she observes. Despite the poem's hints to the contrary, the young poets do not successfully "hear what it said"; the portrait's presence, though constant, is unnoticed. Despite what seems to be her superior wisdom (she can perceive the cycles of time in which the poets are caught), she is considered merely, invisibly decorative.

Harold Bloom refers to “Portrait,” rather condescendingly, as “Sexton’s poem about the tradition,”²⁸ but it is more literally her poem about poetic education. And while as a poem about poetic forebears it lends itself to a simplistic reading—“the tradition” is a club from which women are unfairly excluded—as a poem about literary status as mediated by education it is considerably more complex, and provides a nuanced commentary on the contemporary poetic culture Sexton was beginning to make her way in. When the poem was accepted for publication, Sexton wrote to Snodgrass (describing the poem as “rather crummy”) pointing out that it had a setting he would “recognize from Antioch and down at that tavern.”²⁹ Referring to the Antioch Writers’ Conference of 1958, which she attended as a participant and at which she met Snodgrass and, as Lowell put it, “became a ‘confessional’ poet overnight,” Sexton confirms—using the language of the poem itself—that from a biographical perspective she approached the poem’s scene not from the portrait’s position of exclusion but as one of the poets around the table. This perspective—which only confirms what is already apparent in the poem’s speaker’s demonstrable non-exclusion from poetic expression—complicates the poem’s meditation on gender, literary transmission, and the institution of the college.

It is important not only that the poem is set at college, but that it is set in a college *tavern*, rather than, like Sexton’s Lowell poem, in a classroom. This tavern setting allows Sexton to examine the multifaceted way that the institution of the college develops literary vocation not only through exposure to an established tradition but also through the formation of a dynamic, contemporary community. As the poem privileges the college tavern as a site for poetic education and identity-formation, it presents the inequalities and exclusions of this site and the poetics it produces, but does not by any means fully condemn or reject it. Instead, the old woman “wants to be there,” not only as an onlooker but as a recognized and included member of the

group. As with Sexton's descriptions of the Holmes workshop, and as Sexton's biographical experience at the Antioch conference underscores, the portrait's perspective suggests that the social benefits of poetic education are real, and figure at the level of a vocational identity understood through community—"these are my people." The loose and easy camaraderie of being poets "around a table," of a sociality that encourages the creative expression of "lying" as it could be understood in a benign sense, further suggests that this community can be poetically energizing and inspiring. Poets are brought together through the institution of the college so that they can forge valuable bonds—bonds that are nonetheless themselves informal.

But while "Portrait" demonstrates the benefits of such informal community, and while these benefits are figured as more than merely ironic counterpoint to the excluded status of women, the portrait-speaker also simultaneously emphasizes the limits and exclusions of the social and institutional community the poem describes. As the word "lying" read in a less benign sense implies, the poetic inspiration of social affiliation can be flimsy and shallow, detached from what really matters from a longer perspective (including, from the portrait's perspective, the inevitability of death). It also depends, the poem toys with implying, on the structural exclusion of women, in the sense that its systems of meaning are constructed through the displacement of the portrait, the cup, the hair, onto the sidelines. In this view, "the tradition" does not just not happen to include women and women's special knowledge; it actively relegates them to the periphery, to meaningless, forgotten decoration. In this view, the space of the tavern is not just unaware of but deeply hostile to the idea of women's poetic expression. If the tavern has this potential to exclude both actual women (though the poem never literally asserts this, and a reader even without specific knowledge can assume that Sexton herself must have been included enough to be able to paint the scene as she does) and "feminine" symbols and ideas,

then the unmentioned but implied classroom stands as a potential counterpoint promising inclusion and equality—as indeed was Sexton’s own experience.

The idea that the poetic tradition has been impoverished by the exclusion of women because of the value of women’s special knowledge is a powerful one for Sexton in general. For her, this knowledge, which in “Portrait” is seen not opposing but rather secretly underlying the poetic expression of the male poets, is connected to domesticity. As Middlebrook and others point out, then, the domestic life from which the poet needed, supposedly, to escape remains a primary poetic subject and a source of literary authority for the poet. When she taught a course on her own poetry at Colgate University in 1972, Sexton’s teaching notes show that she quizzed her students on this poem, including asking them to identify its best line, the answer to which was, revealingly, “Poets are sitting in my kitchen.”³⁰ Kitchens figure prominently in Sexton’s work in general (six mentions in *To Bedlam and Part-way Back*, for example), seeming to stand in for the idea of a women’s realm, a site of distinctly female power that is not opposed to poetic tradition but, as with the portrait, possessed of a separate symbolic and charismatic potential. In the context of the sociality of the college tavern, Sexton’s line’s suggests that women’s domestic abilities and experiences provide a grounding with which to encounter “poets” on their own terms. Domesticity, in other words, is neither simply an obstacle to joining the ranks of male, educated “poets,” nor is it simply the repository of the unsung and unrecognized labor that these ranks depend on; it is a means of special access to universal truths.

The image of the kitchen also appears in “For John, Who Begs Me Not to Inquire Further,” a poem like “Elegy in the Classroom” that recasts the terms of Sexton’s relationship to an early mentor; it characterizes her poetic journey with the description: “At first it was private. Then it was more than myself; / it was you, or your house / or your kitchen,” and ends “my

kitchen, your kitchen, / my face, your face.”³¹ The kitchen, for Sexton, is in other words a symbol for the power of poetry to transcend the boundary between public and private, in much the way that the Confessional does. This poem, in its invocation of Sexton’s own domestic reality, can be indirectly related to Sexton’s status as a poet of suburbia, a topic of recent critical interest in her work.³² Sexton’s relationship to suburban domesticity is, in some sense, the inverse of her relationship to academia, both venues mutually complementing and defining each other; both have power in her work by contrast to the other. This is probably best evinced biographically by her decision to use the money she received as a Bunting Fellow at Radcliffe to build a swimming pool—the ultimate status marker and indulgence of suburbia and the opposite of bohemian poetic culture—in her backyard. Spivack recalls:

Anne had used her fellowship from the Radcliffe Institute of Independent Study (given at least partially on the basis of need) to build herself an outdoor swimming pool. This fact did not please the worthy ladies of Radcliffe. Nevertheless, that swimming pool gave her, as well as friends, a great deal of pleasure.³³

As Spivack hints, Sexton’s example here is powerful partly because she challenges and rewrites artistic values. Sexton’s swimming pool belies Bourdieu’s claim that “the artist’s life-style is always a challenge thrown at the bourgeois life-style, which it seeks to condemn as unreal and even absurd, by a sort of practical demonstration of the emptiness of the values and powers it pursues.”³⁴ In this sense, the swimming pool represents a radical recasting of the image of poetic vocation.

Performance and Authenticity

In all of Sexton’s negotiations between her domestic and academic lives, part of what is at stake is the charged and crucial notion for Sexton of authenticity and its relation to the literary

vocation and authority. Portraying a subjectivity caught between two opposed modes of identity—“housewife” and “poet”—Sexton’s poetics explore the central question of the nature of a self that can be so suspended. That her work is fraught with contradictions on this point points not to a flaw but to the powerful paradox that selfhood can be felt simultaneously as coherent and authentic and as fragmented, artificial, and performative. This dynamic is latent in Sexton’s narrative of her career’s beginnings, which, despite its passion, seems to imply a casual or even arbitrary relationship to her vocation as a poet, as if she might have chosen as her life’s work whatever I.A. Richards happened to be teaching on television that week, as if poetry was just what was in front of her when, as Middlebrook puts it, “a buried self emerged and began looking for something to do.”³⁵ This sense of the casual is curiously at odds with the intensity of the narrative of rescue.

The image of the buried self relies, of course, on a notion of authentic and indivisible subjectivity that circumstances can deny and obscure but never fundamentally alter, and that will clamber for expression. At the same time, and paradoxically, it also presumes division and estrangement; if the authentic self is dormant, a false self is in control, and to say “I didn’t know I had any creative depths” implies that identity can be shrouded in a sense of mystery and unknowability. These dynamics are connected, for Sexton, to the Freudian psychoanalysis of which she was a patient and enthusiast. One of the reasons that this analysis was so generative poetically for Sexton is that it allowed her a method for examining the contradictions along this axis between authentic and explicable conceptions of selfhood, on the one hand, and multiple and unknowable selves on the other. The structural similarity between this method and the poetry workshop also help to explain why workshops were such a productive site of vocational-identity-formation for Sexton at the beginning of her career; as talk therapy allows patients to discover

the latent orders and meanings in their feelings and behaviors and intervene to improve them, the workshop likewise uses discussion to discover and improve the latent potential of a poem.

Sexton makes this analogy explicitly when she defends her “Confessional” pursuit of personal material “For John, Who Begs Me Not to Inquire Further”:

Not that it was beautiful,
but that, in the end, there was
a certain sense of order there;
something worth learning
in that narrow diary of my mind³⁶

In this poem, addressed to her first workshop teacher, Sexton expresses the hopeful assumptions of both psychoanalysis and poetry workshops of “a certain sense of order,” of, in a phrase that emphasizes the poem’s implicit educational setting, “something worth learning.” But in addressing these assumptions in the context of a dialogue with her former teacher, Sexton also implicitly undercuts them. Even as the poem argues for an assumption of unity and order within the self, the poem’s structure encodes perspectival multiplicity; in shifting between academic settings and methods and the domestic and bodily (“my kitchen, your kitchen / my face, your face”) and in using the tools of the academic institution and its authority to argue against the conclusions of this authority, the poem complicates its own underlying assumptions that these settings and methods can reveal the truth of the self.

As with Plath, for whom issues of divisibility and self-estrangement were central to poetic self-fashioning, and as Plath implies with her characterization of Esther in *The Bell Jar*, then, a fraught desire for authenticity and wholeness was itself a live and powerful philosophical and aesthetic idea in Sexton’s work. For both poets, this sense of the impossibility of authentic self-understanding manifests partly through an emphasis on the uncanny and a sense of connection to female figures of estrangement and alienation. Furthermore, this interest is

continuous with the poets' own complex use of personas and rejection of Eliotic impersonality, their tendency to trouble the distinctions between self-expression and performance.³⁷ Sexton's "Her Kind" and Plath's "The Disquieting Muses" are both exemplary in this regard as declarations of poetic identity that construct themselves around fairy tale tropes in ways that both announce and complicate the poets' co-identity with their speakers. "Her Kind," a poem depicting the despised but powerful figure of the witch, whose three stanzas each end with the refrain "I have been her kind," was Sexton's standard opening number when she gave public readings (she also headlined a musical group called "Anne Sexton and Her Kind"), and she frequently noted that his choice of opener was intended to "show them what kind of woman she was, and what kind of poet."³⁸

Similarly, Plath's poem begins by revising and revising a familiar fairy tale:

Mother, mother, what illbred aunt
Or what disfigured and unsightly
Cousin did you so unwisely keep
Unasked to my christening, that she
Sent these ladies in her stead
With heads like darning-eggs to nod
And nod and nod at the foot and head
And at the left side of my crib?³⁹

These muses prove, according to the poem, to be responsible not for artistic inspiration but for failure to master the traditional feminine artistic pursuits of dancing and piano, to the speaker's mother's distress. Under their influence, she is "tone-deaf and yes, unteachable. / I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere." As in "Her Kind," then, being a poet is in Plath's depiction an exercise in estrangement from the commerce of everyday life, even as, for Plath, this estrangement goes unexpressed externally: "no frown of mine / Will betray the company I keep." For Sexton, too, the estrangement is not obvious but requires confession; it is not the actual "lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind" who speaks the poem, but the normal-appearing

poet who, within her own multiple identity, has—at times—been “her kind.” Being a female poet, then, means living a double life in the form, in both poems, of secret connection to disturbing uncanny female figures. The folkloric charisma of these figures, in both poems, is a source of cultural and imaginative power that can offer an alternative source of authority to that available through affiliation with established poetic tradition. But its cost, as the poems attest, is psychic pain, alienation not only from society but also from the very possibility of a unified reality and a single authentic self.

At the same time, these poems further complicate their argumentative positions by implying in the context of statements about the instability of identity that the poems should be read as simple expressions of the poets’ actual authentic positions. Sexton achieves this through her performance of the poem itself in public settings and her comments about it. Plath, as was typical of both poets throughout their careers, uses specific biographical information interspersed with the poem’s fantasy in order to associate the speaker with herself. Furthermore, the genre of an *ars poetica* to which these poems to some degree belong and the discursive nature of their speech acts also imply that the thoughts being offered are a sincere communication from an author. This unstable combination of the authentic and the performative and persona-based is essential to the structure of the “Confessional,” which takes much of its energy from the tension between raw expression and artifice object.

In the way that Plath uses biographical information and addresses the poem to her mother, yet revises the poem through a fantasy of poetic identity-formation, the structure of the Confessional can be seen:

In the hurricane, when father’s twelve
Study windows bellied in
Like bubbles about to break, you fed
My brother and me cookies and Ovaltine

And helped the two of us to choir:
“Thor is angry: boom boom boom!
Thor is angry: we don’t care!”
But those ladies broke the panes.⁴⁰

These lines show a determinedly ordinary domestic scene that is torqued and revised through the superreality of the imposed narrative. The mother’s view—that of ordinary reality—is not only ineffectual, it is inaccurate. The poem’s narrative, simultaneously, is fantastical, serving less to present an alternate version of events than to destabilize the whole. Further, the reader is left in doubt as to which autobiographical details are taken from life and which are invented, making the address to the mother additionally complicated. At the same time, even as the speaker claims descent from a trio of misfit female muses the world of masculine authority is implicitly brought in both through father’s study and through the ekphrastic poem’s debt to painter Giorgio de Chirico. The male world of art, then, furnishes an alternative set of feminine protocols for the young poet to follow.

Coda: Sexton in Academia

As the workshop was formative for Sexton in the early years of her career, academia continued to be a major force through and against which Sexton defined her own poetic and cultural identity. As her own teaching career developed, she continued alternately both to emphasize her separateness from academia and to seek its insights and court its approval with more apparent sincerity and more at stake than for her contemporaries for whom the status of education came more easily. Sexton followed Lowell to become a workshop instructor at Boston University for much of her career. She was also a visiting professor at Colgate University (where she had briefly lived as a student wife years earlier), and designed and taught a course on her own poetry entitled “Anne on Anne.” Despite Sexton’s apparent acceptance within academic circles,

however—even after she received an honorary degree from Harvard—Sexton’s writings and interviews show that academia never lost its mystique for her, that it remained not only a setting, a job or a community but a charged and complex symbol of the vocational legitimacy.

While Sexton often embraced the role of an earnest apprentice in the domain of academia, and while this role was often a productive one for her, she also had to contend with the suspicion that her late arrival to the academic milieu made her or revealed her to be permanently, fundamentally uneducated. This double-edged suspicion marked not only her ignorance but also marked her education as what Pierre Bourdieu describes as “belated, methodical learning,” in contrast to education in childhood, which “confers the self-certainty which accompanies the certainty of possessing cultural legitimacy, and the ease which is the touchstone of excellence.”⁴¹ Bourdieu’s account confirms and helps to explain the real difficulty that Sexton faced in establishing her place in the poetic culture of the university, evinced in Lowell’s remembrance among others. Bourdieu’s discussion of the quality of taste as the repository and indicator of social and educational capital also resonates with Sexton’s most famous comment on Lowell’s workshop, in her *Paris Review* interview: What he taught me was taste—perhaps that’s the only thing a poet can be taught.”⁴² In this comment, Sexton seems to be addressing the problem Bourdieu identifies as “the ideology of natural taste” by recasting the institutional classroom learning that would make her taste suspect as an act of transmission by way of a more natural, personal connection.

Sexton’s awareness of the compromised status of her education also helps to explain why James Dickey’s famously negative review of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* was so powerful for Sexton that she carried it in her wallet until her death. Dickey implies that Sexton is too dutifully obedient, “to the conventions of her literary generation and the one just before it,” and then

directly accuses that “Mrs. Sexton ought to dislike it, too, for its easy, A-student, superficially exact “differentness” and its straining to make contrivance and artificiality appear natural.”⁴³ “A-student” is a surprising critique to make of Sexton, but it is paradoxically logical in the context of her negotiations with the institutions of educational capital; considering Sexton’s educational path, it is apparent not only why this comment was so hurtful to her personally, but also why Dickey’s complaint foreshadows the frequent critiques of workshop-originated poems in general. It also, perhaps, helps to explain Sexton’s lifelong obsession with her earnings relative to Dickey’s, as proof, perhaps, of equal professional status.

These dynamics also informed Sexton’s teaching, particularly her peculiar course on her own poetry at Colgate in the spring semester of 1972. When Sexton was hired, she negotiated the arrangement by which she would teach on her own work rather than a more conventional literature course or poetry workshop.⁴⁴ Sexton’s strange course design is in its structure uniquely indebted to the workshop, suggesting the centrality of workshop practices for Sexton’s own self-understanding. As Sexton’s course took her students through her oeuvre, she used a craft-based organization that grouped poems by type (lyric, narrative, etc). Furthermore, her pedagogy expanded to freakish proportions the typical workshop requirement that students imaginatively project themselves into the mind and process of another poet—in this case, of course, the instructor. Sexton’s pedagogical strategy was to ask students to speak about her poetry in her voice; the final assignment, led up to in weekly installments, involved a ventriloquized interview. While the narcissism of this approach is obvious and peculiar, the strategy can also be seen as simply an improvement on the early justifications for workshops themselves, teaching literature “as if it were a continuous experience and not a mere corpus of knowledge.”⁴⁵ Just as the earliest workshops helped students to understand literature as readers by exposing them to the writing

process from the inside, Sexton's course seems designed to help students understand her poems by inhabiting her process.

Sexton's exaggeration of workshop practices also highlights the contradictions and paradoxes of the workshop approach to poetry and shows how it can draw attention to important questions about authorship and identity. In her course design, Sexton brings to the fore the questions of authenticity and self-knowledge in relation to identity and poetics that underlie her work in general and that characterize the workshop. Like the workshop, Sexton's course asks her students to understand authorship as a stable and reliable concept: not only are questions like "what was I thinking when I wrote this?" thought to be discernible from the poem, but the poet is also understood to be a stable and reliable authority on the poems. Underlying these assumptions is the more fundamental assumption that authorship is a conscious act, that the poet not only possesses a full understanding of the poem but that the poem itself does not exceed this understanding, which was also the genesis of the poem. At the same time, however, like the workshop, Sexton's course also calls these assumptions into question by ceding this explanatory authority to others. The course assignments are, in this sense, simply a more radical version of the fundamental process of the workshop, in which students attempt to understand, articulate, and insinuate themselves into the creative process of another. In this sense, Sexton can truly be seen as an exemplary student of the workshop—its potentials and its excesses.

It is interesting to consider the evolutionary process by which Sexton's own course, in which her students ventriloquized her thoughts, emotions, and processes, may have emerged from her experience in Lowell's workshop silently watching her teacher's distress (and then presenting it to the world in poetic form). While Sexton's pedagogy upends Lowell's in some ways, however,

it can still be understood in terms of a poetic lineage in which new poetic professionals are created by impersonating established ones (as Sexton's pedagogy shows us in unusually literal form). Plath's and Sexton's examples diverge from Lowell's, then, but they also accept its hierarchies, as well as a remnant of its suspicion that classroom authority is inherently diminishing to "the certainty of possessing cultural legitimacy and the ease which is the touchstone of excellence." As ambitious young students, both Plath and Sexton accepted as self-evident a top-down model of literary transmission that was simply facilitated by the classroom. Outside of the New England literary power centers, however, a more horizontal model of transmission was also developing, and poet-professors were articulating new ways to understand the operations of the workshop and the role of poetry inside and outside of the classroom.

Notes to Chapter 3

-
- ¹ Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006), 114.
- ² Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 114.
- ³ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 103.
- ⁴ According to biographer Paul Alexander, Plath wrote the poem on “the date that, essentially, marked the end of her marriage to Ted Hughes.” Paul Alexander, *Rough Magic* (New York: Penguin Group, 1991), 299.
- ⁵ Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), 221.
- ⁶ Deborah Nelson astutely reads the curious dispersal of agency in the poem—the relative lack of power of both members of the potential couple—as a satire of Cold War appeals to women’s “ambitious domesticity”: “marriage becomes an institution built on fear and inadequacy, where the couple retreats from the insecurities of public life to heal the wounds to male ego and supply an outlet for female ambition.” Deborah Nelson, “Plath, History, and Politics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 30.
- ⁷ Kathleen Spivack, “Poets and Friends,” in *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 28.
- ⁸ Robert Lowell, “Sylvia Plath’s *Ariel*,” in *Collected Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987), 122.
- ⁹ Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, Karen V. Kukil, ed (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 475.
- ¹⁰ Plath, *Journals*, 471.
- ¹¹ Anne Sexton, “Classroom at Boston University,” in *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, ed Jeffrey Meyers (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 178.
- ¹² Spivack, “Poets and Friends,” 28.
- ¹³ Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 32.
- ¹⁴ Spivack, “Poets and Friends,” 28.
- ¹⁵ Peter Davison, *The Fading Smile: Poets in Boston 1955–1960* (New York: Knopf, 1994).
- ¹⁶ Amanda Golden, “Annotating Modernism: The Reading and Teaching Strategies of Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and Anne Sexton” (dissertation, University of Washington, 2009).
- ¹⁷ A well-known Hudson River School painting by Thomas Cole also depicts the same view.
- ¹⁸ Plath, *Collected Poems*, 87.
- ¹⁹ Sylvia Plath, “Above the Oxbow,” in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), 173.
- ²⁰ Plath, *Journals*, 492.
- ²¹ Robert Lowell, “Anne Sexton,” in Colburn, *Telling the Tale*, 24.
- ²² Anne Sexton, *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*, eds. Lois Ames and Linda Gray Sexton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1994), 39.
- ²³ Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 7.
- ²⁴ Barbara Kevles, “The Art of Poetry: Anne Sexton,” in *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*, ed. J.D. McClatchy (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978), 3.
- ²⁵ Kevles, “The Art of Poetry,” 7.
- ²⁶ Patricia Marx, “Interview with Anne Sexton,” in McClatchy, *Artist and Her Critics*, 30.
- ²⁷ Sexton, *Collected Poems*, 18.

-
- ²⁸ Harold Bloom, *American Women Poets* (New York: Chelsea House, 1986).
- ²⁹ Sexton, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, 63.
- ³⁰ Golden, "Annotating Modernism."
- ³¹ Sexton, *Complete Poems*, 34.
- ³² See "Suburbia," in Jo Gill, *Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetics* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2007), 56–84.
- ³³ Spivack, "Poets and Friends," 38.
- ³⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, tr. Richard Nice (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 57.
- ³⁵ Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton*, 9.
- ³⁶ Sexton, *Complete Poems*, 34.
- ³⁷ For Plath's well-documented relationship with Eliot's ideas, see TK. For Sexton, see Jo Gill, "My Sweeney, Mr. Eliot': Anne Sexton and the 'Impersonal Theory of Poetry,'" *Journal of Modern Literature* Volume 27, No. 1/2 (Fall 2003): 36–56.
- ³⁸ Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton*, 115.
- ³⁹ Plath, *Collected Poems*, 74.
- ⁴⁰ Plath, *Collected Poems*, 75.
- ⁴¹ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 66.
- ⁴² Kevles, "The Art of Poetry," 11.
- ⁴³ James Dickey, "Review of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*," in Colburn, *Telling the Tale*, 63.
- ⁴⁴ Paula M. Salvio, *Anne Sexton: Teacher of Weird Abundance* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007).
- ⁴⁵ Myers, *The Elephants Teach*, 4.

4

The Daily Business of Revelation: Theodore Roethke and Richard Hugo's Pedagogical Poetics

While their Eastern counterparts struggled to envision a form of poetry and poetic culture that could maintain its vitality within the university, Northwestern poets Theodore Roethke, at the University of Washington, and Richard Hugo, first Roethke's student and then a professor at the University of Montana, were establishing models of institutional authority that could nurture poetic production. Both Roethke and Hugo used the poetry classroom to develop modes of authority that could transfer to the page, and the content of workshop lessons led to theories of poetics that facilitated their own prolific work. Directly and indirectly, both poets left a substantial pedagogical legacy deeply intertwined with their poetic legacies. In only the most concrete example of this enduring influence, major educational institutions are named after both poets: a large lecture hall and reading series at the University of Washington named after Roethke, and Richard Hugo House, a community literary center in Seattle named in Hugo's honor.

In Roethke's long tenure at the University of Washington (from 1947 until his death in 1963), his teaching persona presented the classroom as a privileged venue for poetic experience and the poet as a highly visible and revered community figure. Roethke also used teaching to articulate a model of creativity equally open to inspiration and to craft. Hugo adopted many of Roethke's approaches, in his teaching at the University of Montana from 1964 to 1982 and in an influential textbook, *The Triggering Town*. But the poets' approaches and their legacies also have significant differences. Roethke's persona depended partially on the charisma of exceptionalism and on his ability to personally embody a connection between Washington's frontier culture and the literary tradition. Hugo, on the other hand, rejects exceptionalism in favor

of a vision of cooperative poetic community. In the transition from the pedagogical poetics of the Harvard-educated Roethke, a friend of Lowell's and a minor national celebrity, to Hugo's self-effacing, self-consciously provincial poetic stance, it is possible to trace the emergence of a contemporary, professionalized poetic culture of the late twentieth century.

Theodore Roethke: The Charisma of the Classroom

Theodore Roethke's many former students remember him as a remarkably charismatic teacher, the kind of teacher whose presence still remains vital in their lives, decades after his death. To an unusual degree, these students have continued to quote, imitate, write about, discuss in interviews, hold symposia to honor, and generally contend with his memory. "Yes, it seems as if in some ways those were the defining events of my life," poet Carolyn Kizer told a *Paris Review* interviewer when asked about her days as Roethke's student.¹ Roethke was the kind of teacher whose students made and saved lists of what one calls "Theodore Roethke's Bon Mots" and another labels as "Priceless Ad Libs."² These statements, collected in the Roethke archives at the University of Washington, range from the oracular—"The great trap is banality"—to the naughty—"The *New Yorker* is full of prematurely dirty old men"—to the personal—"Ron loves the obvious." In one typical exchange included in a transcript of a 1962 class, he berates one student at length for writing an insufficiently compelling poem. "Laundry notes! You must particularize!" he fumes. Then he adds, "I'm just talking as one ignorant man to another." "At this comment," the transcriptionist notes, "came a short silence, then the class roared forth in laughter."

The shifting tones of these classroom moments give a sense of madcap energy to Roethke's teaching. This energy is also central to the vision of Roethke's teaching documented

by poet and professor David Wagoner, a former student and colleague of Roethke's, in a one-man play entitled *First Class*.³ That Roethke's monologues, as recreated by Wagoner with the help of his memories and his extensive work in Roethke's archives, are compelling as drama, is telling in itself about the charisma of Roethke's teaching. Wagoner also emphasizes the mutability of Roethke's presence, writing in an early stage direction: "He is by turns a talk-show host, a ringmaster, a lion-tamer, a classical orator, a song-and-dance man, a lyric baritone, a shaman, a kind of city editor of poetry, or whatever suits the occasion or his fancy." These shifts in persona, these multiple affects, help to elucidate the charisma of Roethke's teaching. As one would expect from a charismatic professor, Roethke's teaching partakes of the authority of powerful statement. But his teaching is also made compelling by surprise, by unexpected juxtaposition, and by the sense of a deep coherence that substitutes for the logic of linear progression. His teaching, as recorded by notes and transcripts and reproduced by Wagoner, is unscripted, associative, and fast-paced. In all these qualities, it resembles his poetry, and draws on a similar set of rhetorical tools and potentials.

Roethke's teaching was able to serve his poetry, and vice versa, partly because of this stylistic similarity, and he explicitly imagined himself creating similar effects on the page and in the classroom. "To teach very fast, by associational jumps—to teach a class as a *poem*—is dangerous but very exciting. It is possible to build up a "charge" with a group and blast away in a kind of mass diagnosis," he wrote in a notebook.⁴ "At its highest level, this kind of class might become like the poem itself," he explains in an essay, "The Teaching Poet."⁵ These quotes intriguingly suggest that while he was teaching his students, Roethke was also teaching himself, not only about the contents of the classes but about the effects of words on audiences—about timing, juxtaposition, sequence, and surprise. Beyond style, Roethke's role as a professor was

also helped him both to offer and to receive a visceral affirmation of the importance of poetry itself. It allowed him to connect the value of poetry to the broadening educational experiences he was observing taking place in his classroom, to connect the possibilities of his own work with the educational impact of the poems he was teaching.

Further, it also helped him to define the poet-professor, a type of which he was always the foremost and often the only example within his immediate circle, as a deliciously indeterminate figure. Unlike many of his contemporaries, who viewed the role of the teaching poet as an existential burden, Roethke seems to have approached his peculiar institutional status with a mischievous joy. “Look how ‘wicked’ we are: we have a poet who’s a full professor,” he wrote gleefully in a notebook.⁶ Rather than feeling tamed by the university, Roethke seems to have found the institution a useful backdrop for tapping into this sense of poetry’s “wickedness”—its transgressive power. The pleasure and empowerment that Roethke gained from his position, however, was complex, partaking in significant measure not only from his exceptional role in the community but also from the sense of belonging that this status gave him; and not only from the external prestige that he gained from the status of “poet” but also from the connections that occurred within the classroom itself.

“An Act of Love”: Teaching as Intimate Connection

In one of his notebook entries, Roethke writes that “teaching is an act of love, a spiritual cohabitation, one of the few sacred relationships left in a crass secular world.”⁷ Although, admittedly, Roethke’s reflections on the profession of teaching cycle between such earnestness and a harsher cynicism (an emotional fluctuation likely familiar to many teachers), this sense of the classroom as a sacred venue for intimacy and connection is an important component of

Roethke's self-fashioning in his role as an exemplary poet-professor. As his statement suggests, it is important for his conception of teaching not only that teaching facilitates an extraordinary connection, but also that this connection is in contrast and even opposition to the "crass" relationships of the outside world. Implicit in Roethke's notion of teaching is the idea that creative writing, especially poetry, is the academic topic to which these ideas about education most apply (it is difficult to imagine describing a class in physical mechanics, say, as a "spiritual cohabitation"). Roethke's formulation therefore posits poetry itself, both informed appreciation and self-expression, as the medium for this profound interpersonal connection. Poetry, properly approached in the classroom, occasions a transcendence of mundane reality that suggests a mechanism not only for education but also for how poetry itself might matter in the world. It is not only individually powerful but also powerfully relational; student and teacher enter the spiritual realm only together, only through the unique collaboration that occurs as a class works together, if in a workshop setting, toward the realization of each individual's creative vision.

Suggesting the same idea in a lighter register, Roethke's early career as a tennis coach helps to further an understanding of the way that he envisioned a creative-writing pedagogy that placed an important emphasis on close and fulfilling relationships. "My teaching is a variety of coaching, really," he mused in a notebook, and, with this in mind, intercollegiate tennis offers an intriguing comparison to creative writing, in the sense that while players compete alone or in pairs, the unit of organization, of ultimate achievement, is still the team. The young "Coach Roethke," then, whose "loyalty and devotion has helped to mould each man into a suitable player," according to an article in the Penn State student newspaper, may have been forming an approach to poetic pedagogy while noting in his coaching log that "Goodman does not get weight behind backhand," Smalbach exhibits "too much wrist in shots," and, as for Arbergl:

“form poor in most respects. Loops forehand too much.” Roethke’s background, through coaching, of providing students with targeted attention and evaluation in the service of individual expressions and variations of excellence, helps to explain not only how he might have understood his teaching of poetry, but also why that teaching was enabling for his own understanding of his role as a poet. The role of a coach provided a model in which seemingly subjective judgments of individual technique could be formulated and delivered with authority, and understood as benign and even—as sports movies show us again and again—potentially transcendent. Roethke’s coaching or mentorship role in the classroom, in others words, allowed him access to a persona of powerful and beloved authority, a productive stance from which not only to teach but also to write. This stance combined the interpersonal authority of the coach with the additional spiritual force that Roethke—and his lessons—attributed to poetry itself. At its most powerfully envisioned, Roethke’s classroom self-fashioning allowed him to imagine the role of the poet-professor as mediation between individuals and the transcendent. Perhaps even, in a more complex formulation, the professor would be able to facilitate the process by which transcendent experience itself provides this mediation and allows individuals together to reach spiritual heights impossible alone.

For all its power, however, this persona, perhaps more guru than coach, also contains an element of instability and pathos. Roethke most memorably explores this idea in his poem “Elegy for Jane,” subtitled “My student, thrown by a horse.” In this poem, Roethke celebrates the profound sense of connection and intimacy of the poetry classroom, but also acknowledges the ephemeral and incommunicable nature of that connection, which is next to meaningless within the outside world in which his student has ultimately lived and died. The poem offers repeated attempts to assimilate the “spiritual cohabitation” of the teaching relationship to other

relationships more obviously understood as important and close. It begins as if describing a relationship of physical intimacy, signaled through intimate physical observation: “I remember her neckcurls, limp and damp as tendrils.”⁸ Later, the relationship becomes explicitly paternal: “Oh when she was sad, she cast herself down into such a pure depth, / Even a father could not find her.” Finally, the poem ends with a tender and disconsolate acknowledgement of the failure of these relationship models to provide a framework for appropriate grief:

If only I could nudge you from this sleep,
My maimed darling, my skittery pigeon.
Over this damp grave I speak the words of my love:
I, with no rights in this matter,
Neither father nor lover.

But while the poem mourns the teaching relationship’s untranslatability into terms that can be acknowledged and shared at the scene of the grave itself, it also hints that this untranslatability, while a burden, is simultaneously a source of power. The poem suggests that the grief of fathers and lovers, circumscribed by convention and expectation, lacks perhaps the purity of that of one in a more ambiguous role.

More importantly, the poem also suggests that the special circumstances of the poetry classroom do, after all, allow the speaker “rights” not only to claim a meaningful connection with the lost student, but also to assert a special knowledge and intimacy exceeding both what his role would suggest and even what others presumably closer to her would have enjoyed. The poem does this by depicting the relationship as taking place within a subtly fantastical realm, a kind of wonderland of the imagination, where Jane can, it seem, surpass the limits of the everyday and exhibit a truer and more tenderly observed version of herself. In this realm, continuous, perhaps, with the physical classroom of the actual professor-student relationship but clearly of a different order of reality, nature and humanity undergo a continual metamorphosis:

Jane is transformed into a fish, a wren, a sparrow, a fern, and a pigeon, while the leaves whisper and kiss, and the shade bursts into music to accompany her birdsong. The poem, then, emphasizes the transformative power of the study of poetry, which can turn the seemingly staid and institutional university classroom into a space where such metamorphoses can occur. In this classroom fairyland, the poem implies, with its distinct landscape features of winds, trees, piles of straw and pools of water, Jane is at her most vividly compelling, her most intensely individual, commanding the attention and admiration not only of the speaker but of nature itself.

As the poem navigates the classroom wonderland, one of the poem's most peculiar lines is also one of its most interesting: concluding a list of Jane's accompanists, Roethke notes that along with the shade and the leaves, "the mold sang in the bleached valleys under the rose." This line suggests Roethke's own private greenhouse world, most likely referring literally to the cement floor under planting beds, and this reference deepens and reinforces the power of the connection that the poem suggests can occur through the study of poetry. In many previous poems, Roethke has established the greenhouses owned by his father as a personal nexus of great significance, providing a link back to unconscious sense-memories of childhood and developing an additional nimbus of symbolic signification through their repeated presence in his works. That Roethke's greenhouses can be found within the classroom fairyland—that they would even be taking part in his student's own self-expression—suggests that the connections established in the classroom can be so personal and so fundamental that they reach back into childhood and down into the unconscious. On a more literal level, the inclusion of this greenhouse reference also connects Roethke's own creative life to the activity of his teaching.

The grief of the speaker, for all these reasons, is implied to be legitimate in comparison with those who have "rights in this matter," since he knows Jane in a capacity that delivers a

special and powerful access to her interior life. At the same time, though, the speaker's grief is also important because of his power to write the elegy itself; he, though "with no rights in this matter," is the one with the power to preserve, and therefore to own and control, the girl's memory. The complex ambivalences of the elegy show the complex power and pathos of the role of the poet-professor, and, in this poem, poignantly delivers these to the reader as well, opening and universalizing the difficulties of knowing and memorializing in the context of formalized relations and institutions.

"Between a Bank-robber and a Congressman": Teaching as Public Performance

The sense of poetry opening outward is equally important for understanding Roethke's relationship with his status as a professor. "I don't think anybody ever yearned more for a public than I did," Roethke wrote in his notebooks,⁹ and, unlike many of his contemporaries, Roethke was able to channel his work at the university toward fulfilling this yearning. If, as Michael Warner writes, "a public is a relation among strangers,"¹⁰ then teaching not only allowed for intimate connections but also placed Roethke within a large but circumscribed community in which his public status—his being known by strangers—was made tangible. In an era in which the sense of a "public" for poetry was threatened, this was important and enabling. Even to the extent that this public was institutional, it was in a sense more organic, less artificial, than other contemporary publics in which poets found themselves. These were also institutional: either the east-coast public for poetry created through the organs of criticism and reputation—the journals, prizes, publishing houses, etc—or through the counter-cultural institutions of the west coast. Both of these types of publics were self-selecting for people interested in poetry. Roethke's public, on the other hand, constituting the entire university, was in some senses a more

representatively “public” cross-section, one more plausible as a miniature version of the public as a whole. Though it was limited in important ways, including by race, class, and gender, and although Roethke’s sense of universality was in some ways a fantasy, it was an enabling one. Roethke’s sense that “the embattled academic young” constituted “the last, the real American proletariat,” granted him the confidence that he was engaged through his teaching with a vital center of the culture—a center full of potential readers of poetry.

The sense that the university constituted both *a* public and a microcosm of *the* public as also enabled by the specific dynamics of regional identity. Roethke’s tenure at a large, land-grant, Western university meant a freedom, real or perceived, from the intricacies of class-bound identitarian negotiations of the more established Eastern universities like the Harvard of Roethke’s own undergraduate education. The frontier ethos that still ran strong in the Pacific Northwest in 1947, when Roethke joined the faculty of the University of Washington, lent a salutary egalitarian spirit to the university. One important consequence of this: he taught a wide range of students, some professionally interested in writing poetry but most simply rounding out a liberal education. The spirit of amateurism, in other words, was more alive in Roethke’s classes than in those of his counterparts at more venerable universities, allowing him the sense that he was educating not his future rivals or successors but his audience. “Let’s say no one would claim to make poets,” he writes in “The Teaching Poet,” and goes on to add, “There’s no point in being grandiose about results. How many in a generation are true poets?”¹¹ For Roethke, this fact seems not dispiriting but in fact oddly comforting.

Against this backdrop of amateurism, the only professional was Roethke himself, a condition that saved him from much of the angst that attended the professionalization of poetry

for others. For him, the professional could be a genuinely privileged rather than compromised status:

I know when I came to Seattle, the head of my department said, “Ted, we don’t know quite what to do with you: you’re the only serious practicing poet within 1500 miles.” I sort of was given to understand I had a status between— if it were Oklahoma—between a bank-robber and a Congressman.¹²

Roethke imagined his role, in other words, as composed of equal parts transgression and distinction, and these qualities were intimately connected to each other. Furthermore, it was against the backdrop of the “straight” institution of the university that his special status could take on its full power as a creative force, with the university providing both an Apollonian contrast to the Dionysian force of the poet’s energy and a contained venue in which the poet could perform the role of a public figure. It was a space in which a poet could be both marginal and vital, imaginatively separate from the transactions of the day-to-day but also accepted, even necessary, within them. In the same notebook quote, he also articulates more specifically his sense of the dangerousness of the poet within the university:

I take it I’m supposed to stand up for Poesy, but not say anything to make anyone nervous. For you know: one of the problems of the lyric poet is what to do with his spare time; and sometimes it becomes the community’s problem too. It worries people.¹³

Of course, to have a community to worry is a privilege given to few poets, at least in twentieth-century America.

Furthermore, in midcentury Seattle there were also possibilities for Roethke’s campus community to have a porous contiguity with the city itself, which leant Roethke’s sense of himself as a public figure additional gravitas. This was abetted both by the enduring small-town characteristics of a growing Western city and also by Roethke’s own performance of the role of public poet. One department chair, Robert Heilman, recalls in a memoir of Roethke:

He was an invaluable link between the university and a large non-academic community where professors are often suspect, or, because they are either too modest or too magisterial, do not represent their world effectively. As a gown amidst townsmen, he could be offhand, gauche, grumpy, occasionally quarrelsome, even boorish . . . but in the end what came through was a very strong, special personality and a sensed genius joined with a willingness to like quite different men and a desire to be liked by them.¹⁴

Heilman later continues, “No death in the university community, I think, ever evoked a greater sense of loss in the city.”¹⁵

“To Disappear Before All his Masks”: Teaching as Mental Illness

Reminiscences of Roethke’s presence on campus invariably emphasize his outsize personality. This personality, with its eccentricity and non-conformity, is also tied to Roethke’s very real bouts of mental illness; the unpredictability that, in part, made him such a compelling classroom teacher is difficult to separate from the manic episodes from which he devastatingly suffered. In a letter explaining Roethke’s several paid leaves, Robert Heilman explains the way his illness intersected with his campus activities:

Roethke has a nervous ailment of the “manic depressive” type. Periodically, he goes into a “high” or “low” state in which he is incapable of teaching. It is in such periods that he has been on sick leave. (His illnesses are well-known throughout the University and the local community. I have always been pleased that they have been accepted as would any other illness and regarded as the terribly sad lot of an extraordinarily gifted man; his genius has been valued, and his work admired; and all informed people have been eager to save him for the University.)¹⁶

This very public nature of Roethke’s suffering suggests a troubling dark side to the campus persona that was largely enabling for him. It leads to the question of to what degree his campus charisma was enhanced by or may even have been said to exacerbate or cause his personal instability. Marjorie Perloff suggests that the two are linked, quoting Robert Lowell writing to Roethke that they “are brothers” in dysfunction, that “to write we seem to have to go at it with

such single-minded intensity that we are always on the point of drowning.” Perloff comments that Lowell’s statement indicates a “cult of madness as certifying poetic power, as giving *evidence of greatness.*”¹⁷

Wagoner’s *First Class* also implicitly argues that Roethke’s classroom performance of madcap charisma is linked to his actual madness. In the play, the poet gradually descends into a frenzied, though still wonderfully inventive and articulate, state of mental distress. As the title of the play implies, Roethke’s teaching career provides both the occasion and the nominal subject matter, but it provides a more comprehensive and multi-faceted picture than a conventional school story. Through the play’s setting, Wagoner implies instead that the university is the front line of a complex engagement between the internal life of the poet and the public: Wagoner sets the entire play within a classroom, from which the (imaginary) students are summarily dismissed half-way through; he then continues to perform in similar but increasingly eccentric ways for the theater-going audience, suggesting that Roethke’s mental illness itself was in some sense tied to a mode of performance that had its tamest expression in the classroom.

In Wagoner’s account, Roethke’s classroom performance of madness also suggests a belief in the continuity of the university and the public at large. Wagoner shows Roethke attempting to make contact with political leaders. First, he calls a bookseller:

I want to send some of my books to people. At least I *think* they’re people.
(listens) *Words for the Wind*, also known as *Words for the Behind*. Send twelve to the Supreme Court justices. (listens) I don’t know their goddamn names, but they need help. (listens) You could take a big chance and try “The Supreme Court Building, Washington, D.C.” And while you’re at it, send one to Robert “Farmer” Frost with my compliments and tell him to stick it up his ass if he remembers where that is. (listens) Just send it care of Vermont. It knows where he is.

Then he gives the same treatment to local leaders:

This is Professor Theodore Roethke of the University of Washington, and I’d like to speak to the governor. Yes. (waits) This is Professor Theodore Roethke of the

University of Washington. Would you please connect me with the governor? I don't want to talk to you. I want to talk to him. (listens) I'm busy too, but I'm willing to spend a little of my time helping him out. (listens) This is more important than that horseshit. Are you his secretary? His PR man? Do you write any of his speeches? Who does? Does he write them himself? They sound like it. (listens) I don't want to write him a letter. I've got more important things to write. Just tell him I'm on the line. (listens) And the same to you, buddy, with a half-twist.

What is important here, beyond the flavor Wagoner gives of Roethke's disturbance, is the way that Roethke's mania involved an uncomfortable mingling of professorial, poetic, and public modes of authority. This scene comically, or heartbreakingly, demonstrates Roethke's (that is, Wagoner's version of Roethke's) own lack of understanding of the limits of his authority, but suggests this lack of understanding as in some sense a byproduct of Roethke's genuine authority in the institution and as a poet. These distinctions are less obvious than they might seem, Wagoner suggests, and trying to sort them out can look like, and feel like, madness.

Other accounts of Roethke on campus suggest that Wagoner's scenes are taken from life.

In a *Paris Review* interview, poet Carolyn Kizer, who was one of Roethke's students, recounts that

Roethke was ill, off and on, during those years. I could always tell when he was going mad because I would get a couple of dozen long-stemmed American Beauty roses. Lillian Hellman would receive a Chinook salmon sent air express. When the women he was fond of received these presents, instead of being pleased, we would burst into tears, knowing too well what was to come.¹⁸

Kizer also relates a more chilling incident:

The most dramatic time—in the late fifties—I came to the campus to learn that Ted had just arrived at Parrington Hall. He'd run all the way from his home, which was several miles away on a hill overlooking Lake Washington. He had perspired so heavily that his clothes were soaked. I remember he took a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket and it dripped with sweat. We were all terribly upset. He had one of those heavy railroad flashlights in one hand and in the other a mammoth bottle-opener, both of which could have been formidable weapons. I was never afraid of him, but the students were paralyzed. So we called on the late Daniel Weiss, the brilliant Jungian scholar, who was also a black belt in judo, to

stand by. In the classroom Ted did what he always did when he was going mad: he wrote his name on the blackboard, *Theodore Heubner Roethke*. He pronounced his name with a German accent. Then he went outside to a little raised platform in the middle of the quad where the flagpole was. He made an incoherent speech to the passing students, who either ignored him or laughed. Meanwhile someone had called the police. When they came, Dave Wagoner and Dan Weiss and I led Ted to the police car. I know we all felt like Judas. Ted had been belligerent and noisy, but when the police were about to put the handcuffs on him he held out his wrists like a little child. As they drove off, Dave and I collapsed against the wall of Parrington Hall, weeping.

This account emphasizes the humiliation of such incidents, the extent to which it was at odds with the authority and charisma Roethke is said to have exuded. And yet even this debasement has connections to Roethke's view of the value of poetry as an academic discipline and of his own value as a presence on campus. Even breakdown, though upsetting, has a vitality and seriousness about it—that is, a sense of drama—that counteracts the dryness of scholarship, the mustiness and bookishness associated with typical classes.

It is possible, then, to arrive, like Perloff, at the vexing speculation that Roethke may have courted his own illness partly in service of the persona he inhabited as a poet professor. In a notebook, Roethke examined this possibility, writing that “One trouble is of course . . . that the poet in mid-career, as I may say, or should it be male menopause—all his masks begin to disappear or he begins to disappear before all his masks: the roaring boy, the bully of the campus, the beast of Bennington, the raping tinker of Chenango Valley.”¹⁹ The performance of charismatic instability, in other words, can shade into reality. A transcript from a 1962 class also shows the way that Roethke's manic episodes could be integrated into his teaching style. The class—it appears to be the first meeting of the term—begins with what seems to be manic personal free-association:

Am I rolling too fast now? The notion that a poet should be just a poet—come in and be dignified—I could do that when I was nine, or even eight. Well, the old man—I never called him “Old Man” to his face, I would have been knocked

down. Daddy! Six feet one, and he could handle rifles like that—you don't call him Daddy. You call him Papa, that's a term of affection . . . In medical terms, you are looking at someone who is a little high, but that doesn't mean I am drinking. In fact, I've been off the sauce for three weeks, and so help me, I'm gonna stay off. I've done enough drinking. It started when I was 12 or 13. When my father died I just didn't give a bloody damn.

This rant segues without pause, however, into a discussion of the week's poet, Stanley Kunitz, and Roethke's comments on Kunitz have a similar verbal energy and a similar psychological bent to those that animate his own disclosures:

Kunitz is a little man—I don't think he weights more than 130 lbs—but he is tough. He has extraordinary vitality, both intellectual and physical. He was a really good tennis player, if he had worked on it he could easily have got into the first twenty.

The class goes on to an impassioned and relatively rigorous analysis of several Kunitz poems—an analysis linked, however, to these personal observations of Kunitz's size and character.²⁰ For Roethke, then, the everyday personal self-fashioning that he exhibited in the classroom, including the open performance of weakness and vulnerability, provides a means of access to others' poems as well as his own—to poetry in general. As with the Confessional poets, Roethke's role as a university professor allowed him to see life and work as a continual performance of poetic position and authority. In this performance the teaching poet, the poet as special community member, always had to be worthy of the role.

“Like Harpo Marx Teaching the Harp”: Pedagogy as Poetics

The other important consequence of Roethke's teaching was that it allowed and even forced him to develop and articulate a coherent set of poetic principles. The copious evidence that he did this belies the sense among critics that Roethke was naïve and unlettered or that he was haphazard in his practices. Though his notebooks seem to present a barely legible mishmash of ideas for

poems, class notes, and general musings, Roethke was in many respects a careful teacher who cared about the consistency and coherence of his lessons, who considered and worked over in his notebooks and teaching materials ideas and approaches to his subject matter. His teaching entailed both the presentation of a systematic set of lessons and an ongoing exercise in “practical criticism,” and required him to constantly navigate between the two, establishing and refining the relation of theory to practice. This is partly why teaching was so influential to his own poetry, as he explains in a notebook fragment:

We can't escape what we are, and I'm afraid many of my notions about verse (I haven't too many) have been conditioned by the fact that for nearly 25 years I've been trying to teach the young something about the nature of verse by writing it—and that with very little formal knowledge of the subject. So it's going to be like Harpo Marx teaching the harp.²¹

The fact of Roethke's “little formal knowledge” is, in fact, part of what is so distinctive and useful about the creative-writing pedagogy he helped to develop. Unlike many of his contemporaries who taught in other programs, Roethke was not only not himself systematically educated as a literary scholar, he also did not teach as part of a standardized curriculum in English literature. This means not necessarily that the level of rigor of his courses was less than those of these colleagues, but rather that whether he was teaching creative writing or teaching a class on a literary topic he was always teaching his own highly individualized approach to literary understanding and appreciation; he needed to choose only the authors who meant something to him, only the topics that he personally considered important to the poetic trajectory of which he could see himself as an endpoint. It was teaching, then, that presented Roethke with the occasion to define his own poetics and to solve the problems of his relation to literary tradition. By establishing his own definitive version of literary history, he invented a lineage of which he was the natural product; what without teaching would have simply been his own

favorite poems became, through the process of teaching, nodes within a coherent narrative of literary tradition. Similarly, by arranging his courses thematically, by focusing on and isolating topics for study within the complex machinery of poetic language, he was also inventing a theory of poetics, a personal prioritization of poetic possibilities and the relations between them.

In Roethke's pedagogy, three primary elements comprise the building blocks of a poet's education: tradition, craft, and intuition. Teaching helped him develop his understanding of each of these elements and the way that they seem to work together. Intuition, for Roethke, the deep and unconscious center of the mind, is the ultimate wellspring of poetry. But this intuition, crucially, must be shaped and tempered by craft, which itself can only be learned and understood with reference to literary tradition. Roethke's teaching notes suggest that much of the seeming naïveté of his poetics is a conscious posture. Like many of his contemporary pioneers in creative-writing instruction, and like poetry-writing teachers today, in his teaching he was concerned with the value of intuition and he attempted to balance conscious and systematic intellectual activities with imaginative freedom. "A too explicit elucidation in the classroom destroys much of the pleasure of learning," he wrote in a notebook, and went on to elaborate: "By suggestion, by insinuation, by intuition—let the material speak for itself: elucidate quietly. There's a short-hand in teaching just a there is in poetry. I smell out my material like an old she-bear."²²

In the context of these statements, Roethke's well-known villanelle "The Waking" appears to be an *ars poetica*—itself an inherently pedagogical form—that translates into verse the intuitive poetic approach of Roethke's classes. It begins:

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.²³

This poem seems at first glance to fully celebrate the irrationality, even anti-rationality, that Roethke praises in his notebook fragments. Worthwhile knowledge, in the poem, seems to exist in a dream world only accessible through individual intuition, as untranslatable as sleep. Knowledge is dismissed, thinking is subordinated to feeling, and education is figured not as an intellectual process but as an act of physical displacement dictated by personal, mystical imperatives: “I learn by going where I have to go.” The epistemology of the poem suggests, among other things, the importance for Roethke’s poetics of the Freudian idea of the unconscious, the realm of “sleep” from which, to create poetry, the conscious mind must take direction. Beginning with the idea of “waking to sleep,” the poem expresses the ironies of creating a set of rules for poetry—whether in an *ars poetica* or a writing class—based on this conception of poetic inspiration centered on the inaccessible depths of the mind. Rather than condemning learning altogether, however, the poem seeks to redefine it in a way that can hold in tension the conflicting impulses of sleep and waking, the unconscious and conscious minds, individual vision and communication.

The full complexity of this paradox, as well as the answer that the poem suggests, are presented less in the discursive statements the poem makes than in its form—the element of craft. As a villanelle, “The Waking” follows one of the most demanding of the Western verse forms, and the playing out of the rules of the form creates its own logical progression through the poem, parallel to thought. The movement of ideas is constrained not solely by the poet’s imagination, in other words, but by the need to find a rhyme when the form demands a rhyme, or to lead back to a line when the form requires repetition. In “The Waking,” with its ringing vowels and its highly repetitive villanelle form, the reader also experiences the centrality of the

poem's sound to its overall feeling; sound competes with and often seems to overwhelm the sense as the poem's dominant effect. Through its own construction, then, the poem posits craft as an poetic principle in itself, a poetic feature that has the power to mediate between or provide an alternative to the oppositions between the conscious and unconscious centers of creativity. Craft, the manipulation of language for poetic effects, creates abstract aesthetic unities, linking poetry to music rather than argument—a function that would seem to support the anti-rational poetics the poem seems to advocate and enact. But at the same time, as the analogy to music suggests, the use of the highly structured, rigorous form of the villanelle also can be seen as a fundamentally intellectual approach to the creative process. Rules must be followed and complex patterns created according to a set of abstract principles. Roethke's use of the villanelle also gestures toward the intellectual field of literary history, toward the situating of his own poetics in the light of an understood and established tradition. In this light, the poem is a curious but evocative combination of extreme rigor and extreme irrationality, holding the two balanced and pointing to, without actually articulating or providing, the possibility of a higher order than that of either logic or intuition.

In this sense, it resembles his classroom. The sense of intuition balanced and enabled by craft that Roethke articulates in “The Waking” is also essential to his pedagogy. In his teaching materials, one finds repeatedly the assumption that a focus on the materials of craft is an essential building block—perhaps *the* essential building block—of poetic expression. His syllabi and lesson plans reflect these assumptions, with a survey of topics in poetic craft forming the foundation of his creative writing courses, and with those courses organized according to the idea that poetic craft can be learned and mastered via a series of discrete lessons in forms and

techniques. In one typical course outline, for example, from his early tenure at Bennington College, poetic craft is broken down into weekly segments:

1. Rhythm
2. Imagery
3. The Tetrameter Couplet
4. The Pentameter Couplet
5. Diction
6. Tone
7. Quatrains
8. Sonnets
9. Epigrams
10. Revision

Each of these topics is then subdivided into smaller categories, with a list of poets to study in tandem with each element of craft. For instance, Week 3's imagery lessons are to be accompanied by: "Sensuous image: early lyrics, Keats, Yeats, Cummings, Auden. Intuitive image: Blake, Dylan Thomas. Cerebral image: Donne, Crasahw, Marvell, Dickinson. Complex "fused" image: Dante, Milton, Baudelaire, Lorca." For the tetrameter couplet, examples are: "Seventeenth century: Jonson, Milton, Marvell, Vaughn, Butler's "Hudibrastic couplet." Eighteenth century: Swift, Prior, Parnell. Nineteenth century: Coleridge, Scott, Byron and Morris. Present day examples: Housman, Yeats, Warren, Betjeman, Auden. Bad couplet poems: Auslander, Coffin, Kilmer."

As this syllabus reflects, craft, for Roethke, is not only an abstract matter of linguistic technique but is also historical and contextual, at least insofar as it should be learned by reference to poems of the past. This is particularly apparent in Roethke's tendency to organize his lessons around "received forms," which are, by definition, in dialogue with literary tradition. In his many lessons on couplets, quatrains, sonnets, and the like, Roethke's underlying assumption is that literacy in the past uses of the form is an essential component of competency. For instance, in the class session on the tetrameter couplet, which a student transcribed,

Roethke's suggestions to his class are all based on his reading of historical instances: "In this form, you can work with ideas and the metaphysical. It is a good vehicle for satire. The tetrameter is a useful form if you want to be rational. You can dress up a commonplace," but avoid "the longish essay, viewing things from great heights." These comments, made in context of analysis of various examples from mimeographed handouts, suggest the dual responsibilities that Roethke implicitly attached to the teaching poet: to attempt to break down and systematize the properties of poetic language in the abstract, on the one hand, and to acknowledge, on the other, that these properties only exist relationally, in reference to other poems and the readerly expectations those poems have conditioned.

"Imitation, conscious imitation, is one of the great methods, perhaps *the* method, of learning to write," Roethke explains in "How to Write Like Somebody Else," an essay that comprises his fullest exploration of the relationship between literary tradition and poetic education.²⁴ In this essay, Roethke recasts T.S. Eliot's prescriptions about the poet's relationship to tradition through the simple but radical step of considering actual poetic education; he acknowledges the wisdom of Eliot's injunction that "Bad poets imitate; good poets steal," but points out that this is "a terrifying remark for the beginning writer, who is often neither bad nor good but simply, as yet, unformed. He isn't sure whether he is a thief or a fake."²⁵ Roethke's teaching experience, in other words, allows him to enact vis à vis Eliot the process the essay discusses, of daring "to stand up to a great style, to compete with Papa." The way Roethke's own daring is authorized through teaching can also be seen in the essay's explicitly instructional title: for Roethke's, the educational gesture of "How to Write," which contrasts with Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," justifies what is largely an act of poetic theorization. The essay as a whole shows how consciously Roethke applied the imitative lessons of his classroom

to his own poetics, discussing a series of his own imitations and ending: “I should like to think that I have overacknowledged, in one way or another, my debt to Yeats. One simple device provides, I think, an important technical difference. In the pentameter, I end-stop every line.” As a discussion of poetic practice, this seems a far distance from “We think by feeling. What is there to know?” but these contradictory epistemologies of creativity are equally important for Roethke, and the task of keeping them in balance could be said to be the focus of his pedagogy.

Practical Criticism

In the Roethke’s workshops, the attempt to balance intuition, craft, and literary tradition took on a more tangible form. For instance, a later meeting of the Bennington class is typical as it documents the workshop sessions of student poems. These transcriptions were compiled from notes and, while Roethke’s comments are not distinguished in the transcript from those of the students, his influence as a guiding presence over all the discussion is clear.

Pat Crocker: “Age.” [“Age” is the title of the poem.] The rhythm defeated it. There was good observation but the pictures it gave weren’t complete enough. Its best quality was its homely realism—nevertheless, the homeliness bordered on false sentiment. It was suggested that she read some Thomas and Frost.

Janet Loper: She had licked the form—tetrameter couplets. Texture fitted with the idea.

Sarah Moore: Had excellent rhythm, but she hadn’t exploited the dramatic possibilities of her image. She was told to push her sensibility a little further, and try to do a poem in which she conveyed a physical reaction as accurately as possible.

Discussion of Sarah’s poem led to a discussion of Lawrence’s poetry, and we read a couple of his poems—part of Sicilian Cyclamens and possibly “The Fish.” Commented on Lawrence’s rich sensibility and discussed the closeness of his poetry to prose.

These comments are notable in several ways. First, the discussion is quite technical. An emphasis on craft, and particularly on prosody, serves as a lingua franca in the classroom, a common vocabulary and set of concerns established through the analysis of canonical examples from previous weeks. Rhythm and form are in each case the first topic of analysis. Second, however, the discussion exceeds the generalizable technical vocabulary and requires the discussion of the poem's individual contingencies in inevitably idiosyncratic and intuitive-sounding terms: "the pictures it gave weren't complete enough"; "texture fitted with idea"; "push her sensibility a little further." Third, the terms of discussion are evaluative and positivist, in the sense that poetic quality is assumed to be knowable rather than endlessly subjective, and judgments can be understood as reliable and even absolute: good observations are good, forms that are licked are truly licked. The exact degree of homeliness that avoids false sentiment can be noted and identified. This faith in the possibility of absolute judgment is somewhat of an useful fiction for writing, and Roethke's classes seem to achieve it through a combination of force of personality and a faith in the curricular materials of craft and tradition.

A transcript from almost twenty years later, from a 1962 class at the University of Washington, shows a similar set of comments and a procedure whose basic principles seem little altered (despite a slightly different style of transcription):

The line mentioning "pain, as cold as" is too vague and arguable to be compatible with the rest of the poem's exactness and delicacy. If Ruth would cut a lot of the images back it would add more tension and interest—this is the chief lesson to be learned by gifted poets. Buy *Collected Hopkins*.²⁶

Here, as in the Bennington class, the elements of Roethke's poetic pedagogy combine; the teacher as diagnostician issues one prescription of craft and one prescription of tradition to fit with his intuitive sense of the poem. These commentaries on individual students' work are also almost identical in form to Roethke's coaching notes, suggesting that there was truth to his

assertion that his teaching was a form of coaching. The general principles of Roethke's poetry-writing classes were continually shaped by their application to the particular efforts of individual students.

The Perfect Example

If Roethke's teaching is enabled by the plumbing of tradition, it is intriguing to consider the extent to which he may have envisioned his own poems as adding to the stockpile of material for lessons. He occasionally included his own poems in his classes, often in lessons on revision that began with unsuccessful drafts, but also as examples, particularly of forms. It is suggestive, for instance, to consider the possibility that Roethke's particular pedagogical focus on the tetrameter couplet may account for that form's (and its variants') prevalence in his own poetic oeuvre, for his attachment to and continued production of minor "light" and epigrammatic poems in this form. He writes in "The Teaching Poet" that "even a shabby pattern like the tetrameter couplet will throw the student back on the language and force him to be conscious of words as a medium; also it will teach him to shape the sentence to a particular end, to get effects with full and off-rhyme, and to manage the polysyllable."²⁷ In this light, otherwise puzzling poems like "The Donkey" ("I had a Donkey, that was all right, / But he always wanted to fly my Kite") or "The Chair" ("A funny thing about a Chair: / You hardly ever think it's *there*") can perhaps be best understood as Roethke's attempt to substantiate his pedagogy by demonstrating its effectiveness for his own creative process, practicing the "finger exercises in hinky-dinky form" that he assigned to his students and possibly adding to the body of work that might confirm the tetrameter couplet's continuing relevance in the twentieth century.

In “The Teaching Poet,” Roethke also sings the praises of “the perfect example. How we academics hunt and cherish it!”²⁸ And many of Roethke’s own poems, especially the brief formal lyrics that are most frequently anthologized, seem almost to be designed as teaching examples, suggesting a recursive loop between his teaching and his poetic practice. In these poems, a pedagogical function seems to exist alongside other modes of expression and communication, which may explain the frequent presence of these poems in textbooks and syllabi, their relatively secure canonical status in these contexts regardless of the waxing and waning of Roethke’s star among scholars and critics. In other words, in addition to instructing the reader about the poem’s particular thematic concerns, as all poems could be said to do, they also seem, in parallel, to facilitate an introductory lesson in how to read poetry in general by presenting clear mimetic relationships between form and content and by staging interpretive debates that highlight the complex significations of poetic language and that require and reward the close reading skills taught in poetry classes.

Furthermore, these poems seem less to present a poetic education on their own as to be designed as fodder for a lesson in a classroom setting, their latent pedagogical properties requiring reconstitution by an instructor. The idea that a poet might imagine, even unconsciously, a creative writing classroom as the primary scene of reception for his work, is radical and important. It re-imagines the idea of poetic audience, not only in terms of who that audience might be but also the way in which the members of that audience would use and relate to the poem. Since many teachers of poetry classes are poets themselves, it also suggests an alternative model of literary influence and transmission in which poets would be influenced by their own lessons, and the poems that provide the best distillation of poetic concepts would be those with the most ability to last in the minds of future practitioners.

The poem of Roethke's that I would argue best exemplifies these intriguing potentials, and a poem that I would also argue has in fact lived out a disproportionately influential afterlife centered on the creative writing classroom, is "My Papa's Waltz":

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.²⁹

"My Papa's Waltz" is "the perfect example," first, of various elements of craft. It is ideal for teaching meter because its iambic trimeter lines provide a satisfying mimetic relation to the waltz of the poem's title and because it models the rhythmic variation possible within metrical regularity, adding extra syllables on dizzy, easy, knuckle, and buckle, the trochaic substitution of "Slid from" and the anapest of "With a palm." It also provides a neat set of examples of the possibilities of rhyme, with "full and off-rhymes" and masculine and feminine endings abounding (the full rhymes of "breath" and "death," "dirt" and "shirt"; the off or slant rhyme of "pans" and "countenance"; and the especially lurching effect of the feminine slant rhyme of "dizzy" and "easy," to enumerate a few examples). As with the three beat lines, the slight

irregularities of the rhyme are also pleasingly explicable in terms of the poem's subject matter; "of course the waltz is lopsided—he's drunk!"

More importantly, the poem is also perfectly constructed to provide a lesson in the power of poetic suggestion and the New Critical doctrine of productive ambiguity. The words "death," "battered," and "beat," all used in a denotatively innocuous manner, add up to an unmistakable suggestion of violence—and a ready-made lesson in the methods of poetic connotation.

Furthermore, the disconnect between the rough but innocent literal scene and the overtones of violence and abuse create a residue of ambiguity that cannot be fully resolved. (Does the father beat the son or not?) Instead, the two possibilities—fear and love—must be synthesized into a more complex depiction of a relationship than either possibility could produce alone. This is almost a junior version of the New Critical doctrine of the poetic reconciliation of opposites, or suspensions of paradox and, as such, functions as an accessible introduction to complexity in poetry. In other words, it is "the perfect example" of how an ordinary student, not a once-in-a-generation poet, might think of using the possibilities of poetry to express a complex and contradictory facet of his or her own life.

Form was my Father, Father Form

In Roethke's own most complex and lasting poems the complex relation between craft, tradition, and the poetic unconscious is made the object of thematic reflection as well as programmatic enactment. Both in the multi-part poetic sequences in which Roethke developed his most extended poetic performances and across his oeuvre as a whole, there is an alternation between loose free verse, highly crafted free verse, and very tight formal versification. The very fact of these juxtapositions produces a sense of the intermittence of form, of form as a principle that

exerts its presence sometimes but not all of the time. In this context, it is interesting to consider Roethke's notebook musing that "Form acts the father: tells you what you may and may not do."³⁰ It suggests that form for Roethke is connected in both an enabling and a constraining way both to literary tradition and to the Freudian family relations that are so constitutive for him of poetic possibility.

In "The Lost Son," Roethke's first extended poetic sequence and often considered his greatest, Roethke takes this patriarchal quality of form literally, interspersing patterned verse with free as the speaker approaches the Freudian-inflected task of separating from and escaping his father. The poem's more noticeably "crafted" sections are childlike and mystical, with an unassimilated sexual quality that verse's capacity for non-discursive coherence spreads to the natural landscape and the world as a whole:

The shape of a rat?
It's bigger than that.
It's less than a leg
And more than a nose,
Just under the water
It usually goes.³¹

The poem's free verse sections, on the other hand, are more narrative and linear, allowing the speaker a greater sense of control over the events and landscapes of the poem. For example, the pivotal fourth section of the poem, "The Return," describes the father's greenhouse:

There was always a single light
Swinging by the fire-pit
Where the fireman pulled out roses
The big roses, the big bloody clinkers.

Once I stayed all night.
The light in the morning came slowly over the white
Snow.
There were many kinds of cool
Air.
Then came steam.³²

Roethke's poetic control over rhythm and pacing are as apparent in this section as in the metered nursery-rhyme of the previous quote, but to a very different effect. In free verse, the speaker is no longer bewildered by the world around him; the ability to make metaphors is no longer a terrifying capacity of the landscape, but the poet's own ability (to turn, in the example above, coals into roses). Through the poetic ability granted by free verse, the speaker is able to enter, survive, and master the father's world. For the speaker of the poem, then, free verse is associated with power and formal verse with helplessness. For Roethke the poet, in contrast, both formal strategies are necessary, but the difference shows his keen awareness of not only the emotional but also the social ramifications of formal poetic choices.

For Roethke, form is connected not only to the psychosexual intimacies of family connection but also to the public enactment of authority. If formal verse is associated with position, power, tradition, and privilege, Roethke's ambivalent approach to poetic form suggests his negotiation of these aspects of his poetic career. The poetics of form, like the cultural capital of poetry in general, is to be embraced, he implies, but not unthinkingly or without an awareness of the complex social meanings in dialogue with these poetic choices. Roethke explains this point of view in a slightly off-color notebook entry about free verse:

I've always found Robert Frost's remark about free verse—he'd rather play tennis with the net down—I've always found this wonderfully suggestive, as an old coach, in a great number of ways. For one thing I coached at Penn State. We played in clothing cast off—laundered of course—by the football team. Of course, my *derriere* being what it is, I frequently found not only the net at least semi-down, but also my pants . . . You know how things get from too much laundering: the rubber in the various intimate equipment disintegrates, the string would bust in my sweat pants: there'd be a hole in my racket. Well, do you get the analogy: that's me and free verse. Frost, he had a racket and balls all his life; but some of us out in the provinces operated under difficulties: we've had our disorganized lives and consequently our intractable material: we've had to use free verse, on occasion.³³

To Roethke, then, form represents not only the authority of the father figure in a personal sense, but also a sense of cultural authority, a geographical and class privilege from which he feels excluded. In its coarse and embodied sensibility, Roethke's statement situates himself and his poetics in a class position that is both lesser than Frost's and also somehow greater, with its pragmatism and vitality. It is also notable that Roethke's formulation takes Frost's dead metaphor (poetry as a tennis game) and reanimates it through the experience of coaching. It is through educating others, Roethke suggests, and educating others outside of the prestige of traditional scholarship, that his connection to form has been forged.

Richard Hugo: Welcome, Fellow Poet

Richard Hugo is probably the best known of Roethke's former students and certainly the one to have left the most significant mark on creative-writing pedagogy. Hugo's *The Triggering Town*, a slim collection of essays originally published in 1979 and reissued most recently in 2010, constitutes Hugo's most lasting pedagogical legacy, and by extension a significant component of Roethke's legacy as well. In fact, *The Triggering Town*, which is frequently assigned as a textbook for creative writing classes, could be said to be more influential than any other work written by either poet. In Amazon.com's sales rankings, to cite one rough measure of the books' relative impacts, *The Triggering Town* outranks Roethke's *Collected Poems* by more than 12,000 places; it outranks *Making Certain It Goes On*, Hugo's own collected poems, by almost 200,000. Given this discrepancy, it may be tempting to dismiss Hugo as simply a better teacher than he was a poet. But this would be to oversimplify the relationship between *The Triggering Town*, Hugo's own poetic oeuvre, and the workshop culture within which the book has so successfully thrived. Hugo's achievement in *The Triggering Town* is notable because, first of all, his pedagogy is so

deeply tied to his own poetic practice that it serves to solidify the ongoing relevance of his poems, creating informed and sympathetic readers while nominally offering those readers guidance for their own self-expression. Further, and paradoxically, Hugo's approach in *The Triggering Town* also implicitly decreases the importance of his own poetry as it argues for the primacy of writing over reading in constructing a literary life.

The book's chapters are based primarily on Hugo's years of teaching at the University of Montana, where he joined the faculty in 1964 after a first career as an engineer at the Boeing Company. Hugo studied with Roethke at the University of Washington in 1947, and although only one of the book chapter deals directly with Roethke, the influence of his approach is present throughout. To paraphrase Weber, *The Triggering Town* could be said to represent a routinization of Roethke's classroom charisma, a translation of his methods into a durable and transferable pedagogy. In its very format as a textbook, it presents a pedagogical approach that, unlike Roethke's, seems to leave the teacher's own embodied personal charisma out of the equation. In this sense, it could be said to take the understanding of the poet professor modeled by Roethke and separate out the elements of its enduring applicability from the personal magnetism and singularity that Roethke himself relied on. In *The Triggering Town*, the status of the university professor still enables and authorizes poetic expression, both for Hugo himself and potentially for the reader as well, but it also considers the possibility that a poet might be not only less personally charismatic than Roethke but also of a more belated generation, less of a pioneer, and never with a chance of being "the only serious practicing poet within 1500 miles."

What is gained and lost in this translation is not only relevant to Roethke's and Hugo's own considerable influence on teaching and writing practices, but can also be seen as more broadly emblematic of the procedures of routinization that successive generations of teachers and

students enacted as the institutions of creative writing became ever more fully established as a training and career path for poets. But while Hugo positions himself as a successor to Roethke, the differences between the two are also significant. Hugo's revisions to Roethke's pedagogy all move in a direction of increasing democratization, a change that draws attention to the tensions and paradoxes inherent in the poet-professor's role between hierarchical and democratic impulses, elitist and populist views of the role of poetry. On the page, Hugo, like Roethke, situates lyric authority as pedagogical, and describes the institutional status of the professor as authorizing the social relevance of poetic expression. In Hugo's version, however, the personal authority of the professor is explicitly viewed as not only limited but also suspect, and the public relevance of teaching is viewed more in terms of community service than as inspiring exceptionalism. In terms of poetics, Hugo shares with Roethke an overarching vision of creativity entailing a synthesis of intuitive imagination, which cannot be learned, and craft, which can. But the third term of Roethke's poetic triangle, tradition, is absent in Hugo's vision, replaced, significantly, by a distinctively Western sense of regional identity; rather than a European-centered poetic tradition, American landscape and culture provide the primary source of grounding and larger significance in Hugo's formulation. These innovations, all of which are continuous with the general tendencies of Roethke's example, have the unintended effect of challenging many of the fundamental assumptions on which the cultural authorities of the professor and the poet rest.

“The Best Poetry Writing Teacher Ever”: Writing The Student-Professor Relationship

If Hugo's pedagogy encodes a resistance to the hierarchical structure of traditional pedagogy, this resistance starts with the way he figures his own literary inheritance as, increasingly,

Roethke's most prominent former student. Though Hugo emphasized his connection to Roethke, he did not describe or conduct himself as Roethke's protégé in any conventional sense; the relation he maintained with his teacher's legacy, especially after Roethke's death and as Hugo's own literary and academic career burgeoned, was far more complex. Hugo was already twenty-four and a veteran when he studied with Roethke on the G.I. Bill. Perhaps because he was older and more established than most of Roethke's impressionable undergraduates, the personal connection he and Roethke formed was not particularly close. The only letter from Hugo in Roethke's archives captures what seems to be Hugo's allergy to a position of reverence:

Dear Ted:

Understand it's good form to ask. O.K. if I dedicate my thesis to you?

Congr. on the Guggie.

As Ever,
Dick Hugo

P.S. Don't take all year to answer—damn it! I have to assemble the thing in two weeks.

(The letter is typed, but the signature and postscript are written in green ink.) This letter is typical of Hugo's ambivalent relationship to Roethke in that it couches what should be an admiring and friendly overture in a tone that is so offhand that it seems to border on disrespectful (though it's not without a certain slapdash charm). Hugo's lack of deference in this letter, particularly the final admonishment, seems to suggest a discomfort with the basic terms of the student-teacher relationship and a deliberate or at least a heartfelt attempt to refigure it as one between equals. It adopts a posture of nonchalance, even indifference, toward the judgments and hierarchies that would place Roethke above him—and, by democratizing implication, any man above another. This irreverence applies to the world of prizes and degree requirements—the Guggenheim award

is downgraded to “the Guggie” and Hugo’s thesis is “the thing”—but even seems to extend, more dangerously, to the work itself; Hugo’s tone edges toward the potentially disabling implication that poetry itself should not be taken too seriously. While Hugo seems to present himself as a backslapping Everyman, then, there is also a sense of unease lurking behind the tone of the letter, an attempt to forestall the suspicion, maybe, that Hugo’s request may have been motivated not by a sincere feeling of indebtedness and admiration but by an urge to preserve, emphasize, and control the presentation of his relationship with his famous teacher. Read sympathetically, Hugo’s letter seems to give insight into the awkward negotiations of inheritance that a poetry education can produce; more cynically, it seems like an act of calculating reputation-management disguised as bonhomie.

The complex dynamic at work in this private letter also characterizes Hugo’s public position towards Roethke and it underscores the complications of literary inheritance through the classroom. The model of literary inheritance that Hugo describes in his published reflections on Roethke seems to encompass both some degree of genuine devotion and an uneasy eye on the external advantages to be gained from the mentorship of a famous teacher, both genuine admiration and a sense of competitive self-assertion. This ambivalence is in evidence throughout the chapter in *The Triggering Town* that deals overtly with Roethke, “Stray Thoughts on Roethke and Teaching.” It combines hyperbolic praise (“He was probably the best poetry-writing teacher ever”³⁴) with casual judgments and psychoanalytic speculations that, though relatively sympathetic, assign Roethke a position of weakness and reassert Hugo’s authority. The very first paragraph of the chapter establishes this firmly, delivering a double dose of condescension with Hugo describing Roethke’s appearance as “poor and unwashed” despite Roethke’s wardrobe of fancy suits reflecting an “addiction to bourgeois values, his compulsive need to be loved by all,

but most of all the rich.”³⁵ The chapter is riddled throughout with little digs like this one: mixed in in about the same proportion with thoughtful and genuine praise, we learn that Roethke was “frightened” in class; he “often didn’t understand much of what he read”; his “withering” criticism of students displayed his “capacity for cruelty,” and he was “far too competitive for his own good.”³⁶ The deflationary nature of these descriptions certainly seem to reflect the individual personalities and prejudices of both men involved—Roethke’s difficulty, Hugo’s iconoclasm—but its presence in what is functionally a textbook also asks us to read it as advocating the larger point that professorial and poetic authority not only is but should be subject to such deflation. Students should withhold reverence; teachers should not seek, expect, or enjoy it.

“Welcome, Fellow Poet”: Democratizing Poetic Authority

That authority is suspect is, as a pedagogical stance, obviously paradoxical. In attempting to live this contradiction in his classroom, and to articulate its finer distinctions in writing, Hugo is far from alone among humanities professors in the late twentieth century. In this sense, the anti-authority position he takes throughout *The Triggering Town* can be thought of as continuous with much of the thinking in the literature departments either in which creative writing is housed or from which it is metaphorically across the hall. For Hugo, however, classroom authority is problematic not because it reinscribes political hierarchies or promotes ideological mystifications, because it threatens individual imagination.

From the opening gambit of Chapter 1, the book focuses on the suspicion of classroom authority, directly acknowledging both the paradoxes involved and Hugo’s own complicity in them: “You’ll never be a poet,” he tells us he tells his classes on the first day of the term, “until

you realize that everything I say today and this quarter is wrong.”³⁷ Hugo then goes on to complicate this bold and somewhat adolescent declaration by asserting the primacy and singularity of the individual creative impulse: “It may be right for me, but it is wrong for you. Every moment I am, without wanting or trying to, telling you to write like me. But I hope you learn to write like you.” This concern with the problem of the accidental tyranny of the professor separates Hugo from Roethke, who was largely able to enact his pedagogy with the coaching mentality that he was simply helping his students improve, that his classes were about the pursuit of a relatively objective standard of quality, rather than the transmission of taste (or, certainly, ideology). Hugo, however, explicitly connects the very charisma of Roethke’s teaching persona with a problematic and overbearing influence:

He was a dangerous teacher too. And the danger is a natural one for good poetry-writing teachers who are also good poets. Good poets have obsessive ears. They love certain sounds and not others. So they read aloud what they love, responding to their own obsessive needs in the poetry of others. If he is worth a damn, any poet teaching poetry writing constantly and often without knowing it is saying to the student, “Write the way I do. That’s the best sound you can make.” The student who shakes this, who goes on to *his* auditory obsessions and who writes the way the teacher never told him, may become a poet. Roethke, through his fierce love of kinds of verbal music, could be overly influential. David Wagoner, who was quite young when he studied under Roethke at Penn State, told me once of he long painful time he had breaking Roethke’s hold over him.³⁸

That Hugo focuses this sympathetic critique on sound is evidence, in a way, of the continuing influence of Roethke on his own way of thinking.³⁹

As a corollary to Hugo’s concern with the overbearing influence of the teacher is a alternative, more democratic, way of imagining the persona of the poet in the classroom, as a part of the campus community and local public, in the larger community of poets—and on paper. While Roethke’s “bank-robber or Congressman” persona emphasized the poet-professor as a larger-than-life figure—what Heilman describes as “a very strong, special personality and a

sensed genius”—Hugo imagines his role more as a first among equals. A “just telling you what works for me” modesty underlies *The Triggering Town*, and while Hugo seems to delight in impossibly specific advice like “write in a hard-covered notebook with green lined pages” or “use ‘love’ only as a transitive verb for at least fifteen years” he adds that “I’m stating them as rules, but of course they are no more than suggestions—I find the axiomatic tone preferable to a lot of qualifiers. If these work for you, good.”⁴⁰ Hugo’s actual conduct as a teacher also points to the importance his approach places on demystifying the professorial role, especially outside of the classroom itself; he socialized casually with students and, perpetually lonely and boozy, he was famous for opening his Missoula home to students looking for a drink at any hour.

The relaxed approach that Hugo took, in person, toward his professorial authority indicates an important and larger shift from Roethke’s model on the axis of professionalism. For Roethke, it was important that “poet” was a special status. Hugo, by contrast, is representative of an approach in which the very permeability and accessibility that creative writing classes bring to the “official” status of “poet” becomes itself enabling. Where Roethke’s teaching is enabled by the assumption that few “in any one generation are true poets”—meaning there are probably no “true poets” in most poetry writing classes —Hugo writes of his students at the University of Montana that “I have at least six who are excellent and another dozen good enough to appear in most literary magazines.”⁴¹ “Welcome, fellow poet,” he declares at the beginning of *The Triggering Town*, offering the special status to anyone who wishes to claim it, and throughout his writings there is a sense of the university creating a community of professional or semi-professional “true” poets who, in themselves and for themselves, constitute an audience, a readership, and even a public. Hugo’s book, then, articulates a workshop-enabled horizontal view of literary community, a sense of involvement with one’s contemporaries, including

students, that offers an alternative to models of literary community that focus on vertical influence and succession.

While Hugo's inclusiveness may indicate a lowering of standards, it also allows him to define and celebrate an exciting and distinctively American poetic culture whose output, as he writes, "[cannot] help but get better and better."⁴² Linking this culture to American national identity more broadly, he suggests that American poetry is not suited to produce "one big figure of the century, the way other nations do" but instead to consist of "a lot of fine poets, each doing his thing." This, further, is enabled by the open and meritocratic institution of the university, because "there are a lot of bright and substantial young people writing and a lot of good poetry-writing teachers available to help them." A demystified, democratized poetic community, Hugo suggests, can replace the competitive and agonistic understanding of poetry that would lead to "big figures." This is advantageous, in Hugo's formulation, not only because it reflects a becoming modesty but also, crucially, because it offers an antidote to the loneliness of exceptionality. Following the sense in Roethke that poetry and the teaching of poetry constitute a ground on which genuine connections can be made, Hugo extends this beyond the classroom to the larger community of poets formed through the academic workshop and its epiphenomena of reading tours, conferences, residencies, summer festivals, and the like. When Hugo follows his celebration of poetry instruction with a list several of the poetry teachers he admires, there is a sense that this seemingly gratuitous flourish functions as a kind of reality principle, a literal demonstration that the process of teaching and learning about poetry can populate what can otherwise be a lonely world. Workshops, he suggests, mean friends, and in return for that sense of community being a "fine poet doing his own thing" rather than a "big figure" is a worthwhile trade.

Poetics of Self-Expression

Hugo's aggressively modest vision of the role of the poet helps to elucidate his poetics, in contrast with Roethke's, as they apply both to his pedagogy and to his own poetic oeuvre. For Hugo, self-expression is paramount, and the very modesty of his sense of the poet's role enables the primacy he places on the individual vision: a poem that eschews the ambition of describing or encompassing the whole world, or even the nation or group, can free itself to attempt to realize fully a localized and individual vision. What this vision might consist of, importantly, what constitutes self-expression, is more inchoate and inarticulate for Hugo than it is for Roethke; Hugo locates the valuable content of self-expression less in the latent logics and hidden symbols of the unconscious and more in free-floating potentials of the imagination and the individual perspective. "To write a poem, you must have a streak of arrogance . . . by arrogance I mean that when you are writing you must assume that the next thing you put down belongs not for reasons of logic, good sense, or narrative development, but because you put it there. You, the same person who said that, also said this. The adhesive force is your way of writing not sensible connection."⁴³

Hugo's emphasis on the value of self-expression, then, helps to explain the apparent inconsistency of the highly personal, idiosyncratic, and directive approach of *The Triggering Town* coupled with its emphasis on humility and its suspicion of pedagogical and poetic authority. The idea that what an individual can best communicate is "the view from here" also resonates with Hugo's prolific, uneven poetic oeuvre, focused on modest topics and plainspoken language; a poet, to Hugo, is tasked less with delivering thundering insights than with adding an individual point of view to a chorus of others. Hugo literalizes this idea that poetry's role is to

share a situated view through his poem's titles, many of which are simply the names of places in which the poems are set: "West Marginal Way," "Alki Beach," "Duwamish Head," "Port Townsend," and many more. Sections titles such as "Montana with Friends" and his frequent practice of dedicating a poem about a place to a person who was in the place with him further communicate Hugo's sense that poetry's universal appeal can lie in the very specificity and singularity of individual experience. Hugo also achieves complex poetic effects by exploring the limitations of this individual voice and experience; for instance, in "Missoula Softball Tournament," he merges the voice of the poem's speaker with that of the game's spectators: "Shouts from the dugout: go, Ron, go. / Life is better run from," and later,

They shake hands on the mound.
Nice grab on that shot to left. Good game. Good game.
Dust rotates in their headlight beams.
The wives, the beautiful wives, are with their men.⁴⁴

In "Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg," Hugo applies a similarly indeterminate treatment of voice to the relationship between the speaker and the reader, narrating the entire poem in a second person direct address to a "you" who travels through a distinctly Hugo-esque landscape thinking characteristically Hugo-esque thoughts.

The focus these poems show on contingent, situated self-expression goes hand in hand for Hugo with a pedagogical emphasis on process rather than product—another important contrast with Roethke. Where Roethke's workshop transcripts show a set of technically-inflected discussions of poems as rhetorical constructions, assuming that each one is a series of complex *effects*, Hugo's pedagogy is instead aimed at the moment of creativity. "Never worry about the reader," he advises in *The Triggering Town*. "When you are writing, glance over your shoulder and you will see that there is no reader. Just you and the page. Feel lonely? Good. Assuming you can write clear English sentences, give up all worry about communication. If you want to

communicate, use the telephone.”⁴⁵ This writer-centered approach to poetry applies, in Hugo’s model, not just to the moment of original composition but to revision and to workshop interventions as well. Discussing *The Triggering Town* in an interview with poet William Kittredge, he discusses this as part of his motivation in writing the book:

I read a lot of books on writing and they’re quite helpful in one way or another, but most of them, finally, prove to be books about reading. That is to say, they talk about what is wrong about a piece of writing from the standpoint of the reader and, while this can be very helpful in some ways, it doesn’t tell the writer what to do. That is to say, a piece of writing goes wrong for a reader for a different reason than it goes wrong for a writer. And so what I try to do when I teach writing is to get in behind the poem, act as if I had written it myself, and say where did it go wrong.⁴⁶

This pedagogical innovation reflects, inevitably, not only a classroom procedure but also an approach to poetic culture more generally, a move away from a culture focused on reading, and toward a culture focused on writing. This move parallels and inverts, in a way, what D.G. Myers describes as the original justification for creative writing,⁴⁷ namely that learning to write poems could train students as future audiences of complex works (a stance shared to some degree by Roethke). As Hugo describes his classes, he seems to have revised the idea of writing as a training ground for reading into a stranger and more complex relationship between the two. In his workshops, Hugo claims to apply a method of reading that attempts to insinuate itself directly into the moment of writing. In this model, the reader does not passively consume the product of an act of writing, but instead imaginatively participates in the process of creativity. While Hugo describes this model as applying only to workshop sessions, it is easy to see how a method like this, practiced over a series of a few workshops, could permeate a student’s reading practices generally, and it constitutes a radical revision of the relationship between reading and writing, poet and audience. In Hugo’s model of process-oriented self-expression, reading becomes only a kind of vicarious writing, potentially enjoyable but at a remove from the excitement of true

creativity. Furthermore, since everything is process, a finished “product” is an irrelevance, if not an impossibility. In this model, to revisit the comparison to Roethke, craft is important as an aid to the imagination rather than as a means of fussy polishing. Literary tradition, as an inert body of “finished” works, many of them too historically and culturally remote to provide a window into process, loses its importance almost altogether.

Triggering Towns: The Poetics of Regionalism

Hugo’s model, however, does not dispense altogether with the attempt to ground self-expression in something outside of the self; it replaces tradition, in this role, with localism, an attentiveness to the immediate external elements that constitute an individual’s situation and point of view.

Hugo treats this idea quite literally, with a focus on geographical place that, for him, tends toward a kind of nostalgic, downtrodden Western Americana. This replacement of the prestige of tradition with Americana reflects, of course, the democratization that is so important to Hugo’s poetics. It is also notable, however, particularly in *The Triggering Town*, how very specific Hugo’s purportedly universal grounding is, geographically, culturally, and even, from the vantage of more than thirty years since the book’s publication, temporally. Hugo’s localism is at once an extension of the venerable project of defining and supporting a distinctively American literary tradition in contrast to Euro-centric narratives of American literary history, and, more radically, a fusion of Hugo’s pedagogy with the raw materials of his own poetry. While Hugo is clear that these elements are products of his own personal and demographic circumstance, they still make his multiple warnings about the danger of influence begin to look increasingly ambivalent. His writing handbook is, in fact, a document of his own poetic self-fashioning, a statement of poetic practice that could be fully followed by no one but Richard Hugo himself.

The conceit of the “triggering town” itself is a good example of the way that Hugo mixes transferable pedagogy with personal self-expression. The idea of “triggering” is a fairly simple and a fairly abstract one as it has passed into workshop lingua franca: a poem has a “triggering subject”—the idea that originates the creative impulse or appears to be the nominal topic of the poem—and a “real subject,” which is the complex relationship between language, emotions, and ideas that the poem dramatizes. (This, of course, presupposes that poems have “subjects” at all—not an uncontested idea.) Hugo’s point is that to write successfully, poets must come to realize that the “triggering subject” is only a means to an end and not an end in itself and must, as Hugo writes, “switch your allegiance from the triggering subject to the words.”⁴⁸ In Hugo’s formulation, however, this abstract instruction addressed to “you” is constrained and literalized by the extended example of the triggering subject as a town, an example which becomes increasingly idiosyncratic as the book develops it.

The triggering town makes its initial appearance as a clear enough metaphor for the poetic and psychological idea that a poet’s imagination will be most free if he or she chooses a relatively unknown subject—a “triggering town” rather than one’s hometown. But as the book continues and Hugo himself performs the “triggering town” exercise in its pages, the town begins to acquire increasing specificity and the second person begins to drift into the first; in contrast to Hugo’s claim that his method produces serendipitous flights of the imagination, his riffing on the town instead begins to cohere into a recognizable Hugo-esque physical and emotional landscape: Western, small-town, nostalgic, dejected. His off-the-cuff poem begins “That silo, filled with chorus girls and grain” and his commentary on the line is that “Your hometown often provides so many knowns (grains) that the imagination cannot free itself to seek the unknowns (chorus girls).”⁴⁹ But while in the context of Hugo’s imagination, chorus girls may

be unexpected, they seem, when compared to the works of other poets or the infinite possibilities of the situation, to be fully consistent natives of Hugo's own distinctive poetic world. The example poem continues:

the silo "burned down last night and grew back tall.
The grain escaped to the river. The girls ran
crying to the moon. When we knock, the metal
gives a hollow ring."⁵⁰

Hugo's own comment on this extended draft is "God, I'm even rhyming," but from a reader's vantage the more notable feature of these lines is their similarity to the poems Hugo published as poems rather than pedagogical examples, poems grounded in vaguely surreal, depressed Western landscapes. His own use of his method, in other words, belies the implication—which, as I have noted, Hugo himself is at pains to discredit—that the "triggering town" method is independent of subject matter or point of view. As he claims directly, Hugo is not teaching us how to write. He is teaching us how *he* writes.

Or, intriguingly, Hugo is not teaching us how to write but how to read him. The most interesting aspect of *The Triggering Town* is the way that Hugo enacts his own process-oriented model of reading, letting the reader into his own compositional moment and the logic that underlies it. The result of this is that by teaching "you" what is supposedly "your" own self-expression, Hugo is also delivering a lesson on the appreciation of his own writing. A striking example of this is the confluence between *The Triggering Town* and what is probably Hugo's best-known poem, "Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg." The poem begins:

You might come here Sunday on a whim.
Say your life broke down. The last good kiss
You had was years ago. You walk these streets
Laid out by the insane, past hotels
That didn't last, bars that did, the tortured try
Of local drivers to accelerate their lives.
Only churches are kept up. The jail

Turned 70 this year. The only prisoner
Is always in, not knowing what he's done.⁵¹

There is a strong tonal similarity between this town, where “the best liked girls . . . leave each year for Butte,” and the fictional town where chorus girls inhabit the silo. Hugo’s Philipsburg is even more recognizable, however, in an odd chapter of *The Triggering Town* called “Assumptions.” “Assumptions” begins with the bland assertion that “Assumptions lie behind the work of all writers,” but then launches into a list of seventy-nine separate statements, explaining “Whenever I see a town that triggers whatever it is that wants to write a poem, I assume at least one of the following.” These “assumptions” include:

The inhabitants are natives and have lived there forever. I am the only stranger.

I have lived there all my life and should have left long ago, but couldn’t.

I run a hardware store and business is slow.

I run a bar and business is fair and constant.

All beautiful young girls move away right after high school and never return, of f they return, are rich and disdainful of those who stayed on.

The annual picnic is a failure. No one has a good time.

The annual picnic is a huge success, but the only fun people have all year.

The grain elevator is silver.

The water tower is gray and the paint is peeling.

The jail is always empty.

There is one prisoner in jail, always the same prisoner. No one is certain why he is there. He doesn’t want to get out. People have forgotten his name.

As this list partially shows, the “assumptions” Hugo attempts to share with his readers are not only similar but in some cases identical to the observations that constitute his own successful

poetry. The “Assumptions” chapter, though it has a teaching point to make about the power of the imagination to control reality within the realm of the poem, seems not to be an artifact of pedagogy at all. It is, instead, a Richard Hugo poem in the mode of “Degrees of Gray” and many others. But the fact that this distinction between writing and teaching needs to be made, and that it is almost impossible to make fully, is among the achievements of Hugo’s and Roethke’s pedagogical poetics.

The movement from Roethke’s pedagogical poetics to Hugo’s shows one way that practices of poetic self-fashioning have adjusted over time as the normalization and expansion of creative writing programs have become a fact of life. As Roethke’s exceptionalism is translated into Hugo’s horizontality, the sense of “wickedness” that Roethke associates in his notebook with the poet-professor’s role begins to lessen. But while Hugo’s poetics might seem a diminishment of Roethke’s—and while Hugo himself exhibits a strong affinity for a poetic and emotional mode of diminishment—the routinization that his poetics represents is less fatal to charisma than it might seem. With workshop professionalism widely accepted and the door of poetic success increasingly open to many, a venue for a distinctively “workshop” and professorial charisma begins to emerge—a charisma that depends for much of its energy for a self-conscious embodiment of the tensions of an admittedly paradoxical institution.

Notes to Chapter Four

¹ Barbara Thompson Davis, “Carolyn Kizer, The Art of Poetry No. 81,” *The Paris Review* No. 154 (Spring 2000).

² Theodore Roethke Archives, Special Collections, University of Washington Libraries.

³ David Wagoner, *First Class*. Premiered by ACT Theater, Seattle, WA, July 27–August 26, 2007. Unpublished dramatic script.

⁴ Theodore Roethke, *Straw for the Fire: From the Notebooks of Theodore Roethke*, ed. David Wagoner (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2006), 203.

⁵ Theodore Roethke, “The Teaching Poet,” in *On Poetry and Craft* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2001), 105.

⁶ Roethke, *Straw for the Fire*, 202.

⁷ Roethke, *Straw for the Fire*, 213.

⁸ Theodore Roethke, *Collected Poems* (New York: Anchor Books, 1974).

⁹ Roethke, *Straw for the Fire*, 211.

¹⁰ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 74.

¹¹ Roethke, “The Teaching Poet,” 104.

¹² Roethke, *Straw for the Fire*, 205.

¹³ Roethke, *Straw for the Fire*, 205.

¹⁴ Robert Heilman, *The Professor and the Profession* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 120.

¹⁵ Heilman, *Professor and Profession*, 120.

¹⁶ Quoted in Allan Seager, *The Glass House* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 253.

¹⁷ Perloff, “Poètes Maudites,” in Axelrod, *Robert Lowell*, 107.

¹⁸ Davis, “Carolyn Kizer, The Art of Poetry.” Wagoner’s depiction of Roethke’s mania also features the airmailing of salmon, with the gleeful explanation: “It’s brain food!”

¹⁹ Roethke, *Straw for the Fire*, 256.

²⁰ These observations were not only personal in the sense that they relate to Kunitz biographically rather than textually but also in the sense that they derive from Roethke’s own knowledge—including of Kunitz’s tennis skills—developed over the course of the two poets’ long friendship. Kunitz remembers that “we would fight it out on the courts for what we liked to boast, with a bow to Joyce, was the lawn Tennyson championship of the poetic world. For all his six-foot-three, two-hundred-plus pound build and his lumbering gait, [Roethke] was amazingly nimble on his feet and ruthless at the kill, with a smashing service and a thunderous forehand drive. The daemon in him played the game just as it wrote the poems. Whatever he did was an aspect of the same insatiable will to conquer self and art and others. He could not bear to lose. If you managed to beat him by cunning and luck, you could not expect to be congratulated; he was more likely to smash his racket across his knees.” Stanley Kunitz, “Tributes: Stanley Kunitz on Theodore Roethke,” The Poetry Society of America, http://www.poetrysociety.org/psa/poetry/crossroads/tributes/stanley_kunitz_on_theodore_roeth/.

²¹ Roethke, *Straw for the Fire*, 252.

²² Roethke, *Straw for the Fire*, 160.

²³ *Roethke*, *Collected Poems*, 104.

²⁴ Theodore Roethke, “How to Write Like Somebody Else,” in *On Poetry and Craft*, 61.

-
- ²⁵ Roethke, "How to Write," 56.
- ²⁶ CITE. The transcriptionist for this class uses a slightly odd style of reference to students and their work that does not necessarily reflect Roethke's exact phrasings.
- ²⁷ Roethke, "The Teaching Poet," 103.
- ²⁸ Roethke, "The Teaching Poet," 104.
- ²⁹ Roethke, *Collected Poems*, 43.
- ³⁰ Roethke, *Straw for the Fire*, 255.
- ³¹ Roethke, *Collected Poems*, 51.
- ³² Roethke, *Collected Poems*, 54.
- ³³ Roethke, *Straw for the Fire*, 246.
- ³⁴ Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979).
- ³⁵ Hugo, *The Triggering Town*, 27.
- ³⁶ Hugo, *The Triggering Town*, 27–31.
- ³⁷ Hugo, *The Triggering Town*, 3.
- ³⁸ Hugo, *The Triggering Town*, 28.
- ³⁹ Interestingly, Carolyn Kizer explicitly criticizes Hugo on these grounds, in contrast to Roethke: "One of the great things that Ted did was to keep any of us from imitating him. If we tried, he would mock us and tease us so mercilessly that we never tried that again. In contrast, a friend of mine, Richard Hugo, turned out students who wrote like him. I can spot them a mile away, or a continent away. I was at a conference at Stony Brook, and a girl got up and read a poem to me, and I said, "When did you study with Dick Hugo?" She was just floored. But I spotted the formula." Nicholas O'Connell, "Carolyn Kizer" (Interview), in *At the Field's End: Interviews with 22 Pacific Northwest Writers* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1998), 118.
- ⁴⁰ Hugo, *The Triggering Town*, 37.
- ⁴¹ Hugo, *The Triggering Town*, 32.
- ⁴² Hugo, *The Triggering Town*, 33.
- ⁴³ Hugo, *The Triggering Town*, 5.
- ⁴⁴ Richard Hugo, *Making Certain It Goes On: The Collected Poems of Richard Hugo* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 210. Thank you to Brian Reed for suggesting this point.
- ⁴⁵ Hugo, *The Triggering Town*, 5.
- ⁴⁶ William Kitteredge, "Interview with Richard Hugo," in *The Real West Marginal Way* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 260.
- ⁴⁷ Myers, *The Elephants Teach*.
- ⁴⁸ Hugo, *The Triggering Town*, 12.
- ⁴⁹ Hugo, *The Triggering Town*, 12.
- ⁵⁰ Hugo, *The Triggering Town*, 13.
- ⁵¹ Hugo, *Making Certain It Goes On*, 216.

5

Ravel and Unravel: Jorie Graham and the Charisma of Routinization

Since Robert Lowell and Theodore Roethke began teaching creative writing courses in the 1940s, multiple generations of professors and students have participated in workshops, received MFAs, published books, and gone on to teach and guide their own students. In this process, both the initial anxieties and the initial energies of the institutional transformation of poetic culture have faded. Although the underlying complexities of workshop culture and practice remain, the routinization of literary charisma that the workshop represents is expected, if not always accepted, by poets and readers alike. Jorie Graham stands out as a paradigmatic figure of what could be called this new workshop culture, a poet who takes as a given the institutional setting of poetry and uses this institutionality as a source of personal and poetic charisma. Like Plath and Sexton, Graham has used the culture of the workshop to help bolster and explore the authority of her poetic work, a tendency legible in her poems as self-consciousness and reflexivity. And as with Roethke and Hugo, the lessons and the practices of the workshop classroom are also visible informing and influencing her poetics. Combining strategies of self-fashioning from poets of previous generations, Graham's example shows, foremost, that when fully accomplished the routinization of charisma provides a space, paradoxically, where a flourishing charisma can begin to emerge again.

Introduction: Jorie Graham's Multiple Charismas

Jorie Graham is many poets, and each one seems more exceptional than the last. According to the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, she is a poet who is "at the forefront of the effort to

revitalize and redefine American poetry.”¹ James Tate has called her “a poet of staggering intelligence” who “assays nothing less than the whole body of our history.”² In the *Times Literary Supplement*, she is “one of the best, and most intelligent, poets in the language . . . like no one else, neither in her rhythms nor in her insistence on opening up, scrutinizing, and even reversing our experience of time and space.”³ To James Logenbach, she “has engaged the whole human contraption—intellectual, global, domestic, apocalyptic—rather than the narrow emotional slice of it most often reserved for poems.”⁴ The editors of *Multicultural Writers Since 1945: An A-to-Z Guide*, meanwhile, define her by means of her “charmed poet’s life: romantic childhood in Italy, student days in Paris of the 1960s, a glamorous marriage into a famous publishing family, then a glittering career.”⁵ In a *New Yorker* profile, Steven Schiff describes her as embodying the ideal that “a testosterone flushed sophomore might dream a lady poet” to be.⁶ In an issue of *Ploughshares* that she guest-edited, Robert N. Casper gushes over her Harvard teaching career: “a generation of young writers is being wowed by her pedagogy.”⁷ According to foetry.com, a website devoted to exposing corruption and cronyism in the poetry world, she is “America’s number one foet.”⁸ And on facebook.com, to quote a user group’s title, “Jorie Graham Is a Fucking Badass.”

What is most notable about the multiple Grahams who emerge from these quotations is the incongruity between the acclaim critics routinely shower on what is generally read as her impeccably impersonal philosophical poetry, on the one hand, and, on the other, the larger-than-life persona she embodies as a public figure who, to quote her biography on the Poetry Foundation website, “writes, teaches, and evangelizes poetry.” As the quotations above begin to indicate, Graham’s poetry is consistently praised precisely insofar as it evacuates the personal from the project of the lyric, as it refuses, in Logenbach’s terms, the “narrow emotional slice”

that comprises the territory of autobiography in favor of the concerns that would seem to befit “staggering intelligence”: history, apocalypse, time, and space. The Graham who writes poetry, in other words, is largely considered in the criticism as entirely separable from the Graham who “teaches and evangelizes” it, the poetry itself unrelated to and unsullied by the professional stature it enables and is enabled by and emanating instead only from an earnest commitment to exploration of the abstract and an “insistence on opening up, scrutinizing, and even reversing our experience of time and space.” At the same time that she represents the role of university professional and workshop guru with exceptional prominence and charisma, then, Graham’s reputation for poetic rigor and ambition also rests on what is perceived to be her rejection of the traits usually associated with “workshop” poetry.

This is not a coincidence. Graham’s success as the consummate workshop-era professional poet is partially based on her ability to produce a poetry immune to the usual critiques of workshop poems, a poetry that seems conspicuously to be anything but narrow, personal, circumscribed, modest, and Confessional. Instead, if she takes anything from university culture it appears, at least on the surface, to be that culture’s intellectual resources rather than the biographical self-reflexivity and obsession with identity and subjectivity that the academic setting has inspired in other poets. She writes, after all, about Wittgenstein and Pollack, Pascal and Ovid—art, history, philosophy. At the same time that Graham may be said to avoid “workshop” tendencies in her poetry, however, she also exhibits a notable disinclination—unusual among her peers, as we have seen—to malign the institution of the workshop or to publicly express doubts about the possibility of teaching anyone anything about creativity. Graham is a notable figure, then, not only because she has succeeded in the role of poet-

professor, although she undoubtedly has, but also because she has to an unusual degree embraced that role and found within it a viable route to charisma.

Graham's professorial charisma is in the tradition of Theodore Roethke, who described his campus role as a poet-professor as a cross between a bank-robber and a Congressman. For Graham, too, the campus provides a backdrop against which a version of literary celebrity can be enacted. Visiting Graham at the Iowa Writers' Workshop of the 1990s (where she taught until 1999, when she left for Harvard), Stephen Schiff documents Graham's public performance as embodied literary charisma:

To accompany Jorie Graham through the streets and schoolyards and bookstores of Iowa City—especially the bookstores—is to glimpse what it might have been like to join a benevolent feudal noble on a survey of her fiefdom. Swathed in black from head to foot, with enough bracelets and necklaces and rings to herniate a belly dancer, she is greeted everywhere with soft regard and tender, almost obeisant nods.⁹

This account of Graham's presence and dress recalls not only Roethke's illness-tinged eccentricity but reaches back in the campus-poet tradition as far as W.H. Auden, who, at Swarthmore in the 1940s "is reported to have worn no socks, except occasionally on his head in bad weather." In each case, eccentricity is tied to poetic charisma, as if it is an external manifestation of poetry's ability—and imperative—to upend the banality of the everyday. Schiff's portrait emphasizes throughout the idea that Graham's everyday life can be seen as a performance of this quality of "poeticness," a performance that is, to some degree, deliberate and self-conscious: "her costume of scarves, jewelry, and black velvet everything is unvarying to a fault: she wears it even to plant tulip bulbs at dawn. Her tendency to write and read poetry while driving a car has been noted by members of the local constabulary."

Schiff's description of Graham's charisma is also notable because, unlike Roethke's, her eccentricity is neither clownish nor symptomatic of mental imbalance; rather as Schiff suggests

with his description of Graham as “a benevolent feudal noble on a survey of her fiefdom,” it is aristocratic. In this sense, Graham’s charisma speaks to the culturally assured authority and authenticity that Robert Lowell describes in *Life Studies* as fading from the American scene. Lowell imagines true aristocrats replaced by bureaucrats and imitators—like his militarily costumed ancestor Major Mordecai Myers whose portrait “lost his glory when I learned from my father that he was only a ‘major *pro tem*’”—through the increased routinization of modern life. For Lowell, the university scene is ground zero of this problematic routinization. In Graham’s case, however, the “tender, almost obeisant nods” of her Iowa “subjects” indicate the way that the poet-professor can function as an aristocrat of the intellect, embodying both charisma and what Weber refers to as “traditional authority,” that is, authority that attaches to an individual by virtue of his or her position.¹⁰ As a later-generation poet-professor, Graham seems to display a double authority that is both vested in her institutional role and office and also, fundamentally, personal.

While the Graham who resembles a feudal lord is to some degree a figure of exceptionalism, however, her charisma is also based on a vision of inclusiveness and community. In this regard, the style of pedagogical authority that underlies her charismatic authority is more linked to that of Richard Hugo, who writes confidently that “I have at least six [students] who are excellent and another dozen good enough to appear in most literary magazines,” than to Roethke, “the only practicing poet within 1500 miles,” who found “true poets” rare and viewed the poetry workshop as a facet of general education and his students for the most part as future readers, rather than as peers or rivals. Graham, in contrast, is well known for her active mentorship of students and for their resulting professional successes, to the extent that a prohibition against poets judging contests whose entrants include their own students is often known as the “Jorie

Graham rule.” Surrounded by “fellow poets,” both among her students and among her colleagues (including two, James Galvin and Peter Sacks, whom she has married), Graham’s personal charisma does not depend, like Roethke’s to some extent did, on being the only one of her breed; rather than the apartness of the outlaw or the singularity of the mad genius, Graham’s persona seems to embody less difference than excellence.

The perception of Graham’s “excellence” extends to her successes as a teacher, administrator, and community builder, and is connected to her willingness to work harder in these roles and take them more seriously than many of her peers. But it is also aristocratic in Bourdieu’s sense of exhibiting confidence—“the ease which is the touchstone of excellence”—and is attached to her reputation as a poet, her acknowledged success at producing the impersonal, ambitious work Schiff refers to when he titles his article “Big Poetry.” Schiff points out that this big ambition comports oddly with her prominent and busy professional life and with her public performance of poetic eccentricity, a performance he views as highly personal, self-reflexive, and identity-obsessed. “During the time I spent with Graham,” he writes, “I kept waiting for the appearance of the still, contemplative poet, the woman who could sit before the silent page and wait for the sun on the snow to speak. I never saw her.” Schiff’s division of Graham into the “still, contemplative poet,” on the one hand, and the professionally active, self-consciously poetic “reigning queen” on the other, is just one instance of the commonplace assumption that allows much of the critical literature on Graham to treat her poems as autonomous objects and ignore the professional and cultural dialogues into which they speak. This assumption that “Big Poetry” must be held aloof from the experiences that constitute life as a “Big Poet” ignores the continual imbrications of poetry and daily life that comes along with a career within workshop culture.

But taking Graham's career and her writing as a whole, it is possible to see that her professional activities, her role as a teacher and as a public poet within the culture of the university, are not separate from her poems but essential to them. Graham's professional activities and textual poetics form aspects of one continuous process of poetic self-fashioning, in which the reflexivity that has characterized workshop poetry from its early days has become embedded into the process of thought itself. Graham's poetic oeuvre has been an extended dramatization of an attempt to produce poetic meaning while also observing and recognizing that attempt as performance. Her poems attempt to produce lofty moments of thought while also recognizing that loftiness itself is a personally and professionally situated quality, non-neutral, non-universal, and potentially problematic.

Graham incorporates this recognition into her poems not so much through the large-scale destruction of aesthetic unities that have interested her contemporaries the language poets as through subtle acknowledgements that poetic insight is not only a matter of pausing, as Schiff suggests, to "sit before the silent page and wait for the sun on the snow to speak," but arises from culture, and experience, and research. In *Erosion*, her second book, for example, the lovely thought that a river's waves are "the living echo . . . of some great storm far out at sea" comes "from my book"; the struggle of salmon leaping "glittering, past beauty, past / the importance of beauty, / archaic, / not even hungry" occurs "on television."¹¹ In "The Dream of the Unified Field," originally from *Materialism* and later the title poem of Graham's 1995 *New and Selected* volume, a substantial structure of philosophical and historical reflection is built on the single opening line "On my way to bringing you the leotard." The ordinary domestic errand of delivering a daughter's forgotten clothing to her friend's house for a sleepover on a snowy night becomes the occasion for considering beauty, impermanence, aging, love, bird life, old Europe,

and colonialism—an incongruity that is not smoothed over but that remains notable throughout the poem. The poem suggests, then, that the only possible “unified field” exists in the embodied experience that surrounds the writing of a poem—including the self-interested experience of wanting to write a poem.

As Graham’s poetry explores and responds to the conditions of its making, then, including the professional conditions, her role as an institutional representative of Poetry writ large and the degree to which that role is, in the lived experience of it, self-evidently personal rather than textual, is not a lacuna or absence in her poems but instead a consistently discernable subtext. If “poeticness” is a quality that must be self-consciously performed, within as well as outside of poetic texts themselves, then what critics reliably read as detached philosophical inquiry begins to seem to be the staging of a debate with personal, and therefore human, stakes. When considered in the context of workshop protocols, the questions Graham’s poems deal with, such as how to represent the self and the self’s engagement with the world, take on a degree of specificity and, further, sociality. Graham’s poems are not, in this analysis, then, a welcome reaffirmation of the glories of the drily intellectual, but, instead, a meditation on performance, pedagogy, and the way these modes of encounter permeate every possible expression—with emotional gains and losses.

The End of Beauty, the Beginning of Process

One of the clearest affinities in Graham’s poetics for the preoccupations of the workshop is an emphasis on the idea of “process,” a key term for progressive education in general and a central tenet of writing workshop pedagogy in particular. “I’m not the greatest fan of my own work,” Graham told Schiff, “I just believe in the process—not necessarily the results of that process.”¹²

This focus on “process” over “product” is a general feature of almost all modern writing pedagogy and the mechanism, through drafting and revision, by which most instruction occurs in writing classrooms, including workshops. Process is also closely linked to the rhetoric of writerly development that is fundamental to workshop culture. In this rhetoric, improving as a writer is seen as an ongoing process of discovery that is, in itself, inherently valuable, regardless of the quality of the work produced or the success that a writer might enjoy after graduation. Graham’s former student Katie Ford describes this attitude in a tribute published in the collection *Women Poets on Mentorship*, citing “something [Graham] said to us during our first class. *You feel lied to*, she said. You’ve been put on the earth and there is no instruction, no guidebook. That was probably why we felt compelled to write poems, she said. Because we have to write our own lives, our own instruction.”¹³ As Ford’s essay suggests, Graham’s pedagogical stance is based on the idea that the process of creation is an ongoing discipline of inherent and personal value. In her own poetics, one of her attempts is to translate this value outside the narrow realm of the self.

Graham could be said to begin exploring in earnest a poetics of process with her 1987 collection *The End of Beauty*. According to Helen Vendler, in this book the presiding “grace is the Muse of eternal process, who has replaced for Graham the mediated, investigated, and shaped Muse of product.”¹⁴ Most critics align with Vendler in reading the book’s emphasis on process as the enactment of a resistance of closure,¹⁵ an ethical and epistemological critique of aesthetic certitude and an exploration of the possibilities that emerge when a “clicked shut” notion of beauty (to use Graham’s own phrase) is replaced with something more open. Graham examines these critiques and possibilities through a series of mythological analogies that each represent a tension between motion and fixity and each of which dramatizes in a different manner the competing imperatives of flux and signification. Many of these poems consider artist

figures directly and address the processes and dilemmas of composition as faced by these figures: Orpheus and Eurydice, Penelope at her loom, Apollo and Daphne and the creation of the laurel wreath, Jackson Pollack, and others. These poems are all to some extent allegories of the writing process, its stakes always, slightly mind-bendingly, the ability of the poem at hand to exist at all. As in a workshop, however, the mythological (plus Pollack) projections allow the individual problems of authorship to be made collective, spread around to many parties.

Although the poems in *The End of Beauty* are by no means *about* the workshop in any straightforward sense, they reflect the existential discourses and debates that permeate workshop culture: whether creativity can be taught, what the consequences are for art of attempting to teach it, and how to understand the meaning and status of artistic achievement in a complex, pluralistic, and institutionally mediated culture. One of the achievements of *The End of Beauty* is that it represents, to use Mark McGurl's terms, a transformation of these problems of the workshop into aesthetic opportunity. Graham's method in *The End of Beauty*, both her repurposing of myths and stories and what Cal Bédiant calls her "reinvention of the cogitative lyric,"¹⁶ can be read partially as a means of making use of the theoretical potential of the workshop to call into question and help to redefine the act of writing in all its complexities and ramifications. For example, in "Orpheus and Eurydice" the desire of Orpheus, the singer, to turn to look back at Eurydice is figured in terms of the fixities of art:

What she dreamed, as she watched him turning with the bend in the road
(can you

understand this?)—what she dreamed

was of disappearing into the seen

not of disappearing, lord, into the real—

And yes she could feel it in him already, up ahead, that wanting-to-turn-and
cast-the-outline-over-her

by his glance

sealing the edges down¹⁷

The intimation of these lines that looking can be an act of erasure can be traced to numerous sources within theoretical and aesthetic discussion beyond workshop discourse. As the analogy translates to the literary arts, the looked-upon can be thought of as the subject matter of a poem, which some may see that subject matter as obviated by the act of writing. It can also be seen as the poem itself, an interpretation that allows the lines to rehearse a recognizable anxiety of the workshop. That is, they bring to mind the worry that institutions of poetry privilege a poetics of closure and that in particular the scrutiny of poems by workshop procedures represents a “sealing the edges down” of imagination. Looking too hard at a poem through the analytical lens of the classroom, with its need for lessons and conclusions, the worry goes, the intricate and endless web of possibilities that constitute the poem can be destroyed. Worse, the capacity for reading with an openness to these myriad connections is worn down, and an aesthetics of closure prevails out of mere habituation, as the judgments and hierarchies that institutions necessitate simultaneously become fixed and proscriptive.

Unlike in polemics against the workshop, however, in Graham’s poem none of this is necessarily grounds for condemnation. Instead, it presents an opportunity to further understand the dynamics of seeing, expression, creation, and desire that are at work both as a substrate of the Orpheus myth and when readers encounter poems, including and especially in the context of a classroom. Like readers and poems, Orpheus and Eurydice in this reading do not represent pure essences, either psychological or symbolic, but instead embody a confluence of mixed emotions and variable possibilities for encounter. Orpheus, for example, begins the poem anticipating his own imminent self-estrangement: “Up ahead, I know, he felt it stirring in himself already, the

glance, / the darting thing in the pile of rocks, // already in him . . . the point-of-view darting in him.”¹⁸ It is notable that Graham names Orpheus’s destructive glance “point-of-view,” an important term in the workshop lingua franca associated with sophistication of craft and with the ethics of perspectival pluralism.¹⁹ As this surprising word choice suggests, then, in Graham’s reading of the myth Orpheus’s desire for fixity, his desire to look and seal down and possess in an intellectual sense works against his desire for physical, erotic possession, but it does not necessarily work against Eurydice herself or against the world. Rather, it imposes one set of limits that themselves can be productive. After Orpheus has looked, and Eurydice has also looked “into the poison the beginning,” the poem ends:

a doorway open nothing on either side
(a slight wind now around them, three notes from up the hill)

through which morning creeps and the first true notes—

For they were deep in the earth and what is possible swiftly took hold.²⁰

To the extent that this poem reflects on the circumstances of its making, it seems to suggest an agnosticism toward the workshop’s analytical model of artistic reception: the looking that can cause erasure can also be a form of communion and a doorway to possibility. Equally important as this finely balanced resolution of a workshop-culture debate is Graham’s elevation of the debate itself to mythic proportions; linking it implicitly with the narrative of Orpheus and Eurydice and its powerful embodiment of artistic and erotic dilemmas, Graham gives a richer voice to a deeply felt dilemma of contemporary literary culture that is easily dismissed as unfit for poetry.

Graham also recasts a similar dilemma in a biographical light in “To the Reader,” in which a speaker observes (or remembers) a young girl documenting “for Science Fair” the entire contents of a delineated square of earth. Graham depicts this process as both reductive and

destructive—the girl is engaged in “pulling the weeds up with tweezers, / pulling the thriving apart into the true.”²¹ The poem signals, through its title, that the act the writing a poem is analogous to the act described; that to write a poem is the enactment of a similarly negative process of reduction. But it also opens with an expression of longing for this assured sense of truth, not only the truth of one’s setting but also the truth of oneself: “I swear to you she wanted back into the shut, the slow, / a ground onto which to say This is my actual life, Good Morning.”²² This statement, with its opening “swearing,” and its ventriloquized but not typographically quoted declaration of veracity (“my actual life, Good morning”), depicts the self as a telescoping set of inauthenticities with a dizzying inability to find solid ground on which to stand.

Like the dilemmas of Orpheus and the speaker of “To the Reader,” for whom creativity and loss are wound together through the act of attention, the figure of Penelope and her approach to craft present a suggestive metaphor for workshop-era poetics. More explicitly than the Orpheus story, Penelope’s weaving and unweaving speak to a celebration of process as the condition of the artist. Graham’s account of Penelope is, in fact, oddly resonant with the experience of participating in a poetry workshop, revising and revising for an implacable band of professors and classmates (some of whom could also, by the customs of academia, literally be suitors):

1

So that every night above them in her chambers she unweaves it.
Every night by torchlight under the flitting shadows the postponement,
working her fingers into the secret place, the place of what is coming
undone,

2

to make them want her more richly, there, where the pattern softens now,

loosening,

3

to see what was healed under there by the story when it lifts,
by color and progress and motive when they lift,

4

the bandage the history gone into thin air,

5

to have them for an instant in her hands both at once

If Penelope can be read as resembling a workshop student, it is interesting that she considers the process of revision to be a boon, a continual push toward refinement and further understanding. This model of creativity recalls Katie Ford's memoir of Graham's teaching and her injunction that through poetry "we have to write our own lives, our own instruction"—the act of writing itself instructive, pedagogical. Process, as Penelope's craft defines it, is a form of truth-seeking that is characterized by narrative without plot and purpose without teleology. It is as fulfilled by unmaking as by making, since both allow her access to a space of possibility, "to have them for an instant in her hands both at once." In Graham's interpretation of the Penelope story, process is a continual striving the revelatory potential of which is wholly unconnected to a lasting product.

In another poem on the Penelope theme, "Ravel and Unravel," Graham writes:

So that it's right, isn't it, that she should come to love it best,
the unraveling, every night,
the hills and cypresses turning back
into thread, then patience again, then . . .
is it emptiness?
All the work of the eyes and breath and fingertips that forced
the three dimensions down
into each other going now, all of an instant, back
to what other
place?²³

The assertion of this poem that the unraveling could be the most satisfying of Penelope's tasks suggests, with only a little allegorical sleight of hand, a connection between workshop process and postmodernism's radical disruptions to the notion of stability of language. Penelope's weaving, which resembles the workshop not only in its process orientation but also because it is ambivalently social and concerned with an iterated series of socially motivated remakings rather than a static product, explodes signification into raw materials as a fundamental procedure of its work. The "hills and cypresses" that in the momentarily finished tapestry gesture to an unproblematic representation are nightly undone into raw material under the program of continual rethinking that is Penelope's artistic milieu.

Penelope is also a distinctly female archetype of the artist. As Barbara Clayton writes in *A Penelopean Poetics*, Penelope's artistry of process resonates with well-known theories of women's writing—*écriture féminine*—contemporary to Graham's poem: "As a process, [Penelope's 'feminine discourse'] participates in a network of ambiguities that undermine stable and fixed meaning, just as [Hélène] Cixous would have her feminine text subvert phallogocentric discourse."²⁴ Graham's valorization of Penelope's process suggests a similar challenge to a masculinized linearity, with the poems understanding weaving and unweaving as a dialectical process in which the replacement of "stable and fixed meaning" with the "emptiness" of raw thread is neither a disaster nor an improvement but simply an opportunity to weave again.²⁵ Visually, too, many of Graham's poems in *The End of Beauty* resemble the feminized art of weaving more than they do traditional verse, with a line of centered numbers running vertically down the page (the warp) alternating with brief, long-lined stanzas (the weft). These brief, numbered stanzas also seem themselves to suggest a disruption of linearity, with the flow of forward progress interrupted by continual beginnings-*anew*. The stanza numbers comprise a

complicated gesture; numbered stanzas themselves would seem to be an expression of linearity, producing an impression of orderly progress and division. In the poems of *The End of Beauty*, however, the placement of these numbers seems, if not arbitrary, then at least unusual and difficult, on a reader's part, to rationalize. The very difficulty of making use of these numbers either to sort the sections into neat boxes or to map a forward progression calls attention to readerly expectations that this sorting and mapping should be possible. And if it is easy to ignore the numbers and read the poem as a single, non-fragmented expressive lyric, the numbers then, too, serve to disrupt a pressure toward coherence.

But while Penelope's weaving truly is a process of continual non-closure, Graham's is more ambivalent, and the formal gestures at openness call attention to closure more than they successfully prevent it. The very difficulty of Graham's form is, in a sense, an invitation to explanation and interpretation. Furthermore, while Penelope's tapestry is never finished, Graham's poems are not only completed but collated into a book and published, belying to some extent the celebration of process as an unending ecstasy of creation. Through the act of publishing the poems, Graham implicitly suggests the inadequacy of a nightly return to raw thread, to the condition of absolute possibility. This rejection of endless process applies not only to Graham's own practice, but also to her teaching. Her strong encouragement of her students—particularly her female students—to turn poems into books and books into careers suggests that while she may relish the opportunity to revel in pure possibility, the processes of shaping and deciding are equally important. Ultimately, the procrastination and perfectionism that a modern-day Penelope would exhibit must be balanced by a willingness to weave forward rather than to start again.

As with Orpheus, then, Graham employs the story of Penelope partly as a means of thinking through the conditions that allow the production of poetry, and of connecting those conditions to the culturally privileged instances of creation represented in myth. But Graham incorporates the modern scene of production further. Like Penelope, for whom acts of creativity are always foremost acts of self-fashioning, concrete interventions in the social and material conditions that constitute her own biography, Graham throughout *The End of Beauty* acknowledges the personal, situated, embodied nature of her own expression. Just as, for Penelope, the satisfying depiction of “hills and cypresses” and “the days the kings and the soil they’re groundcover / for”²⁶ is a secondary goal to the necessity of keeping her suitors at bay, Graham emphasizes the self-interest implicit even in her abstract and mythological investigations. Five mythical poems are grouped under the rubric of “Self-Portraits As . . .” Each of the self portraits has as its *as* an intimation of conflict: “the gesture between” Adam and Eve, “Apollo and Daphne,” “Hurry and Delay (Penelope at Her Loom),” and “Demeter and Persephone.” Naming these poems “self portraits,” Graham subverts the logic of the genre by means of the divisions within and multiplicity between the poems so labeled. This self-multiplying and self-division recalls the complex persona poems of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, but makes the permutations of the self of these female workshop poets both more explicit and more complex. Like Plath and Sexton, Graham insists that her persona poems—abstract and “cogitative” though they are—are also personal and about individuation and self-expression. Through this gesture, Graham reminds readers that the conceptual structures in which the poems invite us to lose ourselves are also the work of a situated individual. In this sense, the idea of process and its bearing on contemporary poetics is not only an abstraction within the poems but also a mode that the poems themselves enact.

This notion of Graham's own poems as process has been widely accepted. To read the criticism of Graham's work is to steep oneself in the critical consensus that Graham's oeuvre as a whole represents a process of writerly development writ large, a public staging of what is both presented and received as an ongoing journey of artistic and philosophical discovery. Graham's commitment to dramatizing her own poetic process in her published poems is quality she shares notably with Robert Lowell. But unlike Lowell, for whom the orientation toward process became central only in his late books and in whose work this tends toward public revision of specific poems, Graham's strategy has usually been seen as a wholesale revision of her poetics with each new book. This strategy, in which each book sets itself up as a corrective to the book before it, both in terms of subject matter and of style, expands the "breakthrough narrative" that often characterizes poetic biographies (including, famously, Lowell's own) to somewhat disconcerting proportions. Indeed, this focus on process is often described by reviewers and critics in heroic terms: according to James Logenbach, for example, "Graham has been driven to turn against her own best discoveries, risking everything she has achieved."²⁷ Graham herself has also been explicit in describing her poetry according to this explicit narrative of progression:

In each of the books, I essentially had an encounter with something I would consider "other," something that resists the will of the speaker. In . . . *Erosion*, the encounter was primarily with paintings . . . In . . . *The End of Beauty*, the place of paintings in that dynamic was taken by myth . . . In the book after that, *Region of Unlikeness*, I tried to use the kind of fact we think of as autobiographical as the texture against which I was testing my sense of what knowing, or thinking, or feeling is . . . The book entitled *Materialism* in fact tries to use physical place as the resistant material.²⁸

Helen Vendler, who quotes this statement in a review of Graham's 2002 collection *Never*, goes on to expand Graham's own description of her process by claiming that "in each of her books, Graham has rethought—by means of style—her relations to the world,"²⁹ and to echo Logenbach

and others with the remark that “her courage in remaking her style over the years is exemplary.”³⁰

Graham’s career of continual breakthrough and her affinity for “process” recall operations and attitudes of the workshop in suggestive ways. Not least, they resonate with basic workshop, and particularly MFA, procedures, in which students submit work week after week, so that the development of a poem through the revision process, and of a writer over the course of the semester or the duration of the MFA, takes on a collective importance and becomes an effort to which the entire group contributes and a drama in which all participants may be emotionally involved. Furthermore, in the setting of a workshop, in which poets come physically together to share their work over a period of time (often also living and working in close quarters with each other), this drama signifies automatically in human and personal terms, even in cases where the content and subject matter of the poems themselves is anything but biographical; the narrative arc of the creative process itself maintains a personal quality. The opportunity to witness and participate in this writerly development of others is one of the greatest pleasures of the workshop, for participants and instructors, and it lends a richness to the eventual “products” of the poetic endeavor, an ability to read “process” palimpsestically within what initially appears to be a fixed and static “finished” work. This leads to the idea that poetic work in general can be legible and should be approached as the external manifestation of a personal process of poetic struggle and development, an idea that represents a significant—and far from universally accepted—theory of poetics. Thus Graham can claim in an online interview that

it is a more useful experience for the reader, though, if they come to a poet knowing the full body of that poet’s work. They do not need to know about the life, the career, the other nonsense—positions on this or that. They would be better readers, though, if they knew the body of work. Kids who have only read John Ashbery’s two most recent books have no idea who is writing them or how to hear them, it seems to me. When they inform me of that fact I

feel—after I say they should go back and read the first five or six books—that their “reaction” is more attitude, mood and opinion than it is understanding and felt critique.³¹

This position, as Graham articulates it, is interesting insofar as it is a definition of a poem as neither the autonomous object of New Criticism or the culturally, biographically, and historically inflected artifact (“the other nonsense”) that much contemporary scholarship would recognize, but rather one node within a highly individualized narrative of a poet’s progress.

While the pursuit of this narrative is undoubtedly rewarding, and offers insights Graham’s work, into a critical focus on the book-by-book progression of Graham’s development also, by staying within a closed textual frame, elides the social and performative aspect of Graham’s poetics. An appreciation of Graham’s “breakthroughs”—from compact, shapely lyrics in her first two books to the disorderly long lines of *The End of Beauty*, for example, benefits from a skepticism that falls short of the denunciations of her vociferous critics, but that considers her poetic production as a performative act of self-conscious self-fashioning in addition to an earnest record of a journey toward an accurate rendering of the vagaries of perception. Most concretely, this allows a reading of Graham’s poems to consider the fact that her wide-ranging intelligence, with its explicit ambitions to record the intersections of the everyday world with the timeless and metaphysical, might be productively read as expressing an awareness of the social and cultural complexities of act of writing poetry itself. Many of Graham’s most well-known and affecting poems, in other words, can be read as reflecting and commenting upon the conditions of their own making, including the social, professional, institutional, and pedagogical conditions of the poetry workshop. To put it simply, Graham’s speakers are aware that they are writing poems; the poet whom Schiff shows to be engaged enough by the public performance of poetic identity that she gardens in her “lady poet” uniform

of black velvet and scarves does not when writing poems abandon this awareness that “poet” is a socially marked identity with a charismatic authority that derives from a set of linked performances of self-fashioning that occur both on and off the page. This awareness is, in Graham’s poetics, both a burden and a source of insight; as Graham’s speaker watches herself think, her poems position poetic insight as self-conscious and socially situated within a culture whose resistances to the prophetic music of poetry a poet must take seriously, and in which a poet must also constantly negotiate a broadly self-reflexive culture in which all insights must be tempered by a recognition that the presentation of acts of thought must be understood as staged and hence cheapened and belated even as this same awareness present new opportunities for pathos and insight.

Real Selves, Private Words: Fictions of *Materialism*

Graham’s fifth book, *Materialism*, opens with a poem called “Notes on the Reality of the Self,” a title that repeats several times throughout the book. David Orr, writing in the *New York Times*, describes this as an “ostentatiously thinky” title, a label that could just as well apply to the book in its entirety, in which Graham’s poems are interspersed with selections and rewritings from Sir Francis Bacon, Wittgenstein, Dante, Walter Benjamin, Plato, Brecht, Benjamin Whorf, McGuffey’s *New Fifth Reader*, Walt Whitman, and Jonathan Edwards.³² The book’s title, too, is named after an “ism,” a particularly “thinky” brand of philosophical abstraction; the irony of the title is that the subject of this “ism” is the concrete, material world that is precisely the opposite of abstraction itself. This highly cerebral irony is the ostensible subject of the book: how to think about the embodied reality that resists thinking and exists in opposition to it. But the poems have another subject as well: the tension that arises because this inquiry takes place not only in the

context of an embodied material self but also of a biographical, socially identified self.

Philosophical inquiry is not simply disinterested intellectual pursuit, in other words, but also self-fashioning, and also performance. The ostentation that Orr notes, then, can be read as a thematic subject of the poems and the performative, self-reflexive staging of abstract thinking as an integrated component of their strategies.

The first poem entitled “Notes on the Reality of the Self” provides a good example of this dynamic. It begins:

Watching the river, each handful of it closing over the next,
brown and swollen. Oaklimbs,
gnawed at by waterfilm, lifted, relifted, lapped-at all day in
this dance of non-discovery. All things are
possible. Last year's leaves, coming unstuck from shore,
rippling suddenly again with the illusion,
and carried, twirling, shiny again and fat,
towards the quick throes of another tentative
conclusion, bobbing, circling in little suction their stiff presence
on the surface compels. Nothing is virtual.
The long brown throat of it sucking up from some faraway melt.
Expression pouring forth, all content no meaning.
The force of it and the thingness of it identical.
Spit forth, licked up, snapped where the force
exceeds the weight, clickings, pockets.
A long sigh through the land, an exhalation.³³

The poem could accurately be described as a meditation on the distinctions between reality and imagination, occasioned by observations of nature. This irreproachably Stevensian conceit, however, is torqued by the fact that the poem also admits to being a documentary record of the deep thoughts a speaker had while walking the dog. In other words, it exchanges the abstracted stance of a Stevensian speaker, the authority accessible through sonorous disembodiment, for one of the most ubiquitous and maligned subgenres of workshop lyric: the poem of existential musing on everyday encounters with nature in a vaguely suburban landscape.³⁴

The poem begins as if trying to summon the pure materialism of the physical world, eliding—again, ostentatiously—the speaker’s actual presence in the scene by leaving out the opening sentence’s grammatical subject and beginning the poem with a sentence fragment: “watching the river.” The poem continues watching the river for sixteen lines without naming or situating the watcher. Held in an uneasy limbo between third and first person, the poem enacts what is nonetheless clearly an individual thought process; its wild alternations between precise physical observations and speculative interpretations are nothing if not the leaps of an individual intuition: first, “oaklimbs, / gnawed at by waterfilm,” then, “all things are possible.” These observations and interpretations discursively delineate an important set of issues, not least as a metaphorical commentary on poetics, as the river becomes “Expression pouring forth, all content no meaning. / The force of it and the thingness of it identical.” But what is most interesting in these lines is not the nuance of the philosophical position alone, but the way that the poem stages the act of inquiry as the self-conscious and situated meditation of an individual who is not only watching the river, but also watching herself think. The river’s “expression pouring forth” is fundamentally alien, then, to the human consciousness that cannot separate “content” from “meaning,” yes, but also and more subtly cannot separate expression from performance—performance aimed both at the speaker herself and, implicitly, at the reader. And this performance, as the poem enacts it, is both dramatic and risky. As the poem builds up its observations of the river, expounding on the condition of “all things” and the nature of “nothing” and crescendoing to “a long sigh through the land,” the writing edges up to the boundary of pretentiousness and begins waving signal flags. And then it deflates, with the long-delayed introduction of the first-person speaker: “I let the dog loose in this stretch.”

Nick Halpern's analysis of the everyday and the prophetic as two conflicting impulses of postwar American poetry helps to explain the modulations of this poem. Halpern writes of Graham that she is one of a number of poets who began their careers

in the thick of the tension between the prophetic and the everyday. They have already in their first book a sense of what it might mean to be able to do justice to both kinds of experience, a sense of the difficulty and also of the necessity of it. Jorie Graham, for example, begins her career as a kind of prophetic poet, but her prophetic voice is already at the start more flexible, more nuanced, than Lowell's. That is, she is aware from her very first poem that the prophetic voice is a speech genre. Such poets may never come to a satisfactory hybrid speech genre—their minds are too restless to see the finding of a hybrid as anything but a dubious place of rest.³⁵

As Halpern's analysis suggests, Graham's elevated philosophical tone is not meant to survive fully intact the intrusion of the everyday; once a reader can picture the scene of the poem in personal and, to use Graham's own conceit, material terms, the disembodied, disinterested meditation of the first lines seems staged, conspicuous, and self-indulgent. They are a speech genre.

By contrasting impersonal meditation with a gesture toward the ordinary and everyday, then, Graham suggests that in her poetics a truly detached stance is impossible and, thus, that self-awareness and self-consciousness will always intrude on the moment of perfect prophetic or philosophical expression. Crucially, this is not only self-consciousness in the metaphysical sense that signals an awareness of the problems of subjectivity, but, more pressingly, in the colloquial sense that means embarrassment. Graham's speaker, steeped as she is in the reflexive currents of late-twentieth century culture, and schooled in the highly personal and embodied pedagogies of the workshop, cannot meditate on the river without tracking the modulations of this meditation and opening them to judgment according to a social decorum. The poem, then, is involved in a complex drama of self-authorization, in which an earnest fidelity to the complexities of the

poem's philosophical inquiry requires that an everyday, personal perspective must be acknowledged despite the fact that the social dictates of that perspective ("don't be pretentious") existentially threaten the poem's ability to perform philosophical inquiry in lyric form at all. More concretely, philosophical profundity seems cheapened when placed in the context of the everyday, in which speech and actions are interpreted socially as well as metaphysically—and this is, of course, one of the paradoxes of the writing workshop and the communities that form around it.

As the poem "Notes on the Reality of the Self" proceeds, it extends its commentary on the role of the poet as one who thinks in public. As its self-consciousness deepens, it becomes increasingly a poem not only about thinking but also about the writing process. Once the dog has been let loose, so to speak, the poem explicitly begins considering what can be seen as a series of technical and theoretical questions of poetics:

I see it from here and then
I see it from here. Is there a new way of looking—
valences and little hooks—inevitabilities, proba-
bilities? It flaps and slaps. Is this body the one
I know as me? How private these words? And these? Can you
smell it . . . ?

In these lines, Graham stages a multilayered drama of performance and communication, one in which the reader must maintain multiple awarenesses simultaneously. One of these layers is a cinematic-realist mode, in which the reader watches the watcher of the river and accesses her thoughts while she does not know herself to be observed. Another is a self-consciously authorial mode in which the poet separates herself from the watcher of the river and considers how this experience of watching might be instrumentalized to produce a poem. This doubling of perspective, and the challenges it poses to notions of authentic selfhood, helps to elucidate the

title of the poem and to show how a scene that initially appeared to have nothing to do with the self could in fact speak to the metaphysics of identity.

These lines, however, also exhibit a puzzling and compelling disingenuousness that complicates the poem further, when they bring in the reader and consider the creation of the poem not only as an expressive act but also as a social one. When Graham asks “how private these words? And these? Can you / smell it . . . ?” she poses, as rhetorical, questions that do in fact have answers. Most saliently, “these words,” at the point of uptake by the reader, are not at all private. And this has less to do with the nature of words or expression in the abstract than it does with the fact that Graham herself has the inclination and the ability to write and publish her “words” in the form of poems that can find a relatively wide audience. The question, posed as metaphysical, is actually professional and practical. Graham’s self-consciously illogical invitation to the reader to join in her perception recalls a later interview in which she tells Thomas Gardner that

I’ve been focusing on the reader for a long time now. And on the emotions out of which the desire to see stems. I want to implicate the reader, obviously, in that desire. That’s what a poem does. That’s especially what the sensorial activity of a poem – shared by poet and reader – does, or hopes to do. What images are for: to unify the experience of reader and writer.³⁶

At this point, the process of writing the poem becomes an explicit concern of the poem, as the text winds to its completion:

The nature of goodness the mind exhales.
I see myself. I am a widening angle of
and nevertheless and this performance has rapidly—
nailing each point and then the next right point, inter-
locking, correct, correct again, each rightness snapping loose,
floating, hooking in the air, swirling, seed-down,
quick—*the evidence of the visual henceforth—*and henceforth, loosening

As the poem ends, the speaker's unified voice fragments; without entirely abandoning the conceit that the shape of nature could give shape to the workings of the mind, it depicts that mind as a chaotic swirl of disparate elements. These elements are grammatically and typographically separated without being classifiable into coherent categories or even a straightforward sequence. Instead, observations of the scene (floating, hooking in the air, swirling, seed-down) and tentative abstractions (the nature of goodness) are almost lost within observations of the self and the process of thinking, which recur in what begins to seem like a closed circuit, in which thoughts about writing the poem *become* the poem, which then prompt more thoughts, and so on. Part of the drama and pathos of the poem, in other word, is the way it stages the process of writing a poem in a culture of intense self-reflexivity. Its description of the creative process is partially interesting insofar as it recalls the tensions between fixity and openness that animate *The End of Beauty*: “nailing each point and then the next right point, inter- /locking, correct, correct again, each rightness snapping loose / . . . and henceforth, loosening.” But it is also interesting because it describes the creative process in physical terms that suggest sensual pleasure. If most of the energy of the poet's mind, even as she writes, is devoted, to self-observation, as these final lines show, that is not a situation without its own possibilities and, further, it creates an winning openness in the character of the speaker.

The book's third poem, “In the Hotel,” continues this, and connects this self-observation more explicitly to the pedagogies of the workshop. The poem begins with the telling and also sweetly comical occurrence of the speaker receiving what appears to be writing advice in a dream:

1) start in the middle and 2) be self-
effacing said the voice—remote and merciful it seemed—
in the dream and then I woke.³⁷

The poem goes on to attempt in a complex way to apply these precepts to observations of the morning and the hotel, but this opening is significant in itself. As in “Notes on the Reality of the Self,” Graham suggests that the self-consciousness that characterizes the culture of the poetry workshop permeates deeply into the creative process. Here she literalizes this sense further, by writing workshop-style instruction into a dream, suggesting that the workshop mode of thought goes deeper even than consciousness. This suggestion is particularly pointed because of the significance of dreams in the modern psychological paradigms derived from Freud; that even the supposed messengers of the authentic, unmediated self model themselves on the institution of the workshop shows the breadth of that institution, its ability to structure identity rather than simply critique writing.

A Tenable “We”: Scandal and Politics

In the past decade, Graham’s poems have become more publicly engaged as, in parallel, her public persona has become more fraught. In 2004, Graham became the preeminent target of a website called foetry.com, an internet campaign attempting to expose corruption in the so-called “po-biz.” The general argument of Foetry’s founder, a librarian named Alan Cordle, was that the poetry world was rife with cronyism and that poetry institutions, while purporting to be meritocracies, in fact handed out perks and publication opportunities to their leaders’ friends, lovers, and, especially, students. The complaints against Graham, in particular, focused on what was seen to be her excessive promotion of her own students not only openly but also as an anonymous judge of contests, leading to the naming of the so-called “Jorie Graham rule.” In 2005, Graham told the *New York Times* “that the claims on Foetry were untrue as well as

‘vitriolic and very painful’ and took unfair aim ‘at the people who have worked to try to help young poets in this country.’”

It is easy to see why this scandal must seem to Graham like an example of no good deed going unpunished. Graham is consistently praised as an exceptionally dedicated and generous teacher. Robert Caspar writes in *Ploughshares*,

She is known to spend an hour in workshop on a single poem—trying to get at, and work with, its underlying impulse. She moves deftly from poetics to prosody in her critiques, and with a focus that makes her reading all the more powerful. One-on-one, she bedazzles her students with insights and revisions—and she's helped turn many an M.F.A. thesis into a prize-winning first book.³⁸

Even on foetry.com itself, former student David James Callan writes that,

she called me at home to tell me she enjoyed a particular poem that I had written--a poem I later EXPLODED in her workshop, and so on. The following Fall, when I had her Workshop--which was perhaps the best class I had ever taken--she helped me and the other students find the essence of the poems we were writing, and helped push us forward and past hangups and mental blocks to places that we had never gone. Everyone in her workshops grew to speak about and write poems better than they could have imagined.³⁹

In *Women Poets on Mentorship*, Katie Ford describes in depth the experience of studying with Graham:

Her intensity, the rigor of her mind—some students refer to her as a “force of nature”—is what she’s known for among her students. And there is a long line of them, of course, writing and publishing poetry today. Perhaps some of them waited outside her door once, sometimes for hours, for a conference. I never thought it was foolish to wait there, in that red upholstered chair by the fake flowers in the entryway to the department. How could it be? When she got there, probably very tired because of all of us, she would sit and read my poems, and it felt as if those poems were the only thing present to her in that moment, and she would take all of her intensity of mind and give it over to the making of poetry.

Ford goes on to narrate the unusual closeness of Graham’s academic mentorship as students move toward publication:

She told me she thought I was close to having a book and that she wanted me to bring her all my writing—the scraps, the abandoned lines, the drafts—in a cardboard box. I brought the box. After a few weeks we met in her office, and she fanned the stacks of poems (or half-poems) she had weeded out into three arcs across her desk, one for each chapter of the book. The second chapter was nearly done . . . but the first chapter, the third—they were rough, they were nothing yet. I needed at least twenty-five more poems to make a book. Somehow, I believed her when she said I was close.

This process, through which her mentorship actively provides the impetus for a student to move into publication—into professionalism—is part of what galls Cordle and others about Graham. It seems self-interested because it ensures that a higher percentage of Graham’s students go on to their own positions of influence in the poetry world than do the students of poet-professors who do not actively coach their students over the initial hurdles of professional membership. Graham further draws fire as a prolific and exuberant public advocate for works she likes, particularly those of her students; David Orr writes in the *New York Times* that “as Shelley might say, if Graham fell upon the thorns of life, she’d blurb.”

Whatever one thinks of the contest-dependent system of contemporary poetry publication or of Graham’s conduct within that system, Graham’s loyalty to her students, and the rancor she has drawn for it, is illuminating in terms of the cultural status of the workshop. It suggests a profound tension that persists within the institution of academic creative writing between the open, public, and democratic values higher education often claims and the narrow exclusivity associated with the ivory tower. Even teaching in an open-application program at a public university, a set of circumstances that nominally mean anyone would have an equal chance to study with Graham and earn her favor, the system is perceived as clubby and unfair. Furthermore, Graham’s own persona, as well as her unusually vocal advocacy and proclivity for judging contests in the first place (not to mention in favor of her students), makes her a natural target for this suspicion. Graham’s very success at making the status of poet professor into a

source of unapologetic charisma also makes her a visible personification of that institution in all its complexities and ambivalences. The suspicion that poetry cannot and should not be taught attaches itself to Graham.

Graham's reputation has suffered from the idea that dedication to student work is unseemly. The Foetry scandal is in part a fruition of the set of suspicions of the workshop that have dogged the institution from the beginning. It suggests the way that the university became at least in the eyes of Graham's critics, a site in which aristocratic notions of lineage could be applied, or seem to be applied, under the cover of a supposedly meritocratic system. In this view, pedagogical notions are phony, and the entire operation is a scam, the status of poet no more open to outsiders than the secret room in which Lowell's Harvard workshops were held.

If this is the culture in which “Graham is the reigning queen” (to use a phrase from Schiff’s profile), the culture of the workshop, then the notion of a public poetry written from within that culture becomes deeply troubled. Graham, who has been throughout her career subtly sensitive to the requirement to acknowledge and depict within poems the performance of self-fashioning that a culture poetic professionalism requires both on and off the page, it is worth asking what influence foetry.com’s “vitriolic and very painful” public drubbing may have had on her work. In this vein, it is easy to speculate that there may be a connection between the fire Graham has come under as an academic hack, a partisan and manipulator of the decadent and corrupt system of the poetry workshop, and her increasingly public and political poetry. Her most recent book, *Sea Change*, for example, deals primarily with the environmental crisis, but is also explicitly political, with poems like “Guantanamo” about U.S. public policy. As with the reflexivity of her earlier work, “Guantanamo” brings up the possibility that the techniques and effects of poetry can collude with oppression:

say these are only
counter-resistant coercive interrogation techniques, as in give me your
name, give it, I will take it, I will re-
classify it, I will withhold you from you, just like that, for a little while, it won't hurt
much, think of a garden, take your mind off
things, think sea, wind, thunder, root, think tree that will hold you
up, imagine it holding you
up, choose to be who you are, quick choose it, that will help.

In this poem, the voice of poetic imagery—the voice that urges the contemplation of a garden, of the “sea, wind, thunder, root,” who says “think tree”—is the voice of the interrogator attempt to manipulate a prisoner. Reflection on natural beauty, not only a mainstay of poetry in general but a centerpiece of Graham’s own work, becomes a distraction in the face of imperial power and a consolation intended to divert attention from justice.

At the same time, however, Graham also explains the public ambition of her political poetry as one of raising awareness rather than providing beautiful distractions. She couches this ambition in terms that are similar to those that might describe the task of a workshop leader, of approaching a poem together, acknowledging the reactions of each participant, seeing together without occluding difference, speaking to Thomas Gardner:

Can we look into the very act of description to find where our instinct for destruction sets in? Where are its seeds? In the words themselves, in the mind’s capacity to figure, elaborate, imagine? Will a communal action – via a writer’s and reader’s meeting on the page – create a tenable “we”? Can that “we” combat our capacity for destruction and self-destruction?⁴⁰

Graham’s sense of the mechanism for a viable political poetry, then, is the same as the mechanism for a poetry workshop. This utopian vision describes, perhaps, the highest point of workshop potential, speaking to the workshop’s ability to combine and connect in deep and subtle ways the aesthetic and literary with the personal and social.

Conclusion: Graham and Lowell

Although it appears not to have been meant as a deliberate homage, that Graham and Robert Lowell chose the same phrase—Augustine’s *regio dissimilitudinis*—as book titles is a telling concurrence. The two poets are in many ways comparable figures, each hailed relatively young as a—even the—major poet of his or her generation, praised for the intense intelligence and erudition of his or her poetry, and employed first at the University of Iowa and then at Harvard. The similarities run deeper. Both Graham and Lowell come from glamorous, cosmopolitan backgrounds that inform their poetry in content, in lyric persona, and reception. Elizabeth Bishop’s well-known remark to Lowell that his pedigree made her “green with envy . . . all you have to do is put down the names! And it seems significant, illustrative, American” seems echoed in similarly hyperbolic comments about Graham’s background. For example, Robert Caspar’s *Ploughshares* profile refers to Graham as “the kind of poet whose life is nothing less than cinematic.” Helen Vendler explicates this cinematic quality, writing that “For Graham, what used to be called spirituality is a fact of life as self-evident as materiality. Perhaps no-one brought up in Italy - with its churches, its music, its paintings, its grandeur of aspiration could fail to think of the spiritual activity of consciousness as wholly real and productive, something which deserves a grander denomination than either of its secular names, ‘thought’ and ‘aesthetic conception.’”⁴¹

Vendler’s observation, like Caspar’s and Bishop’s, is significant because it is so avowedly biographical, and because the biography it alludes to is so pointedly figured as not only out of the ordinary but somehow superior to it. According to Vendler, Graham—by dint of geographical happenstance—is naturally spiritual, naturally linked to “grandeur.” Both Graham and Lowell, in other words, emit and are known for what Bourdieu calls the aristocratic “ease which is the touchstone of excellence.” Both enter the institutional setting of the workshop

classroom with a pedigree and glamour that already seems “poetic,” already possessing a culturally sanctioned charismatic authority that could contrast with the authority of the classroom. For this reason, perhaps, both poets have been praised for the “public” quality of their ambition even while writing a dense, challenging, and hermetically allusive body of work. This ambition has combined with a curious effort to push the limits of a publicly oriented poetry’s ability to acknowledge biography and to explore and situate identity. Both poets have done this partially through a career in which they have preformed revision and remaking in public. For Lowell, this involved most notably the reshaping and republication of his later sonnet sequences in *Notebook*, *For Lizzie and Harriet*, and *History*. For Graham, it has been visible in the formal reinventions she has performed between books and her articulated need to for new and revised engagements with her subject matter.

Both Lowell and Graham, then, in these successive books, embrace an aesthetic of process and revision that recalls Graham’s invocation of Penelope’s weaving in *The End of Beauty* and that, on a larger scale, also reflects the literary attitudes encoded by the procedures of the workshop. Like Penelope’s weaving, these publications suggest that artistic achievement is fluid, iterative, unstable. Unlike Penelope’s weaving, however, the earlier books are not undone by the publications of the later ones, so that the achievement remains in some sense cumulative even if a logic of supplanting is implied. For both Lowell and Graham, this tension is resolved, in a sense, through narrative biography. The progression from book to book becomes itself a drama, as if, through successive revisions, the poets are actively co-writing their own critical biographies—chapter by chapter, book by book. This process seems to enact what McGurl cites as the uniquely modern “‘compulsion for the manufacture, self-design, and self-staging’ of a biography and, indeed, for the obsessive ‘reading’ of that biography even as it is being written.”⁴²

The succession of books becomes a “life poem” whose subject is the repeated grappings of the poet with the events and the problems of human life.⁴³

This also helps to explain the way increasing public and historical ambition of both poets’ work as they have moved into later stages of careers marked by early success and continuous institutional affiliation. For both Lowell and Graham, an aesthetic, intellectual, and moral orientation toward process has been a way to mediate between the public and the personal, and to reflect the curious tension between highly embodied personal self-reflexivity, on the one hand, and a consciousness of social and institutional determinism, on the other, that characterize workshop culture in its status as a microcosm of twentieth- and twenty-first century subjectivity. Given these similarities, the differences between Lowell’s and Graham’s relationships to their teaching lives and the nature of the public performance of poeticness that they have enacted is worth noting. In short, Lowell’s public persona is characterized by diffidence, Graham’s by enthusiasm. Lowell as a teacher gave off an air of disengagement and, as Alan Williamson tactfully puts it, “economized the effort he put into understanding any single student poem.” Of the experience of teaching his most famous student, Sylvia Plath, he writes (in the preface to *Ariel*) that “somehow none of it sank very deep into my awareness.” Graham, on the other hand, who officially “evangelizes poetry,” says of her former students “I love them all,” in a public display that, to David Orr, “practically yodels Poooeetrrry!”

This difference could be explained in many ways: personality, gender, Graham’s personal stability compared to Lowell’s episodic mental illness. But I would like to suggest that the difference is also generational. In this sense, it can help us to understand the development of the culture of the workshop and what that development has meant for poets writing between the time that Lowell first stepped into a creative writing classroom and today. Unlike Lowell, whose first

exposure to the pedagogical business of “creative writing” was his own attempts to teach it, Graham belongs to a generation who was educated within the workshop system. She not only awards but also holds the dubious and embattled credential of the MFA (or awarded it, when she was at Iowa; Harvard offers courses but not a degree in creative writing). For Graham, the sense that academic life poses a visceral threat to identity, which Lowell explores so passionately in *Life Studies*, has been replaced by a recognition that the workshop is here to stay.

How far the poetic culture has come from Lowell’s youth, when he considered classroom education “valueless and detrimental,” can be seen particularly well in Graham’s poetic “origin story.” Asked how she became a poet, Graham says “I got lost one day in the corridors at NYU, and heard the words, ‘I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. I do not think that they will sing to me’ floating out of a doorway. I was so taken that I went into the classroom for a minute and sank into a seat in the back row. It was M.L. Rosenthal reading [T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred] Prufrock.’ I sat there for the whole semester.”⁴⁴ That this romantic story is set entirely in the context of university education illustrates how easily a poet of Graham’s generation could accept and begin fashioning herself within the charisma of the classroom. Graham is a poet for whom the practices, assumptions, and identities of the workshop are built in to her poetic DNA; for her, workshop culture is a given of modernity that can be the stuff of art, but that, self-evidently, is not to be fled or undone. Her success as a teacher may stem partly from this fact; hearteningly for her students, she declines to suggest that poetry cannot in any meaningful sense be taught.

In this sense, it is fitting that Graham has been among the most prominent advocates of laying to rest the debate that Lowell memorably initiated when he divided the poetry world into the camps of “the cooked and the raw.” If the intervening decades have shown us anything, it is

that the terms that Lowell devised for thinking about developments within the culture of poetry are impossible to apply to the workshop and what it hath wrought. Consider that anti-academic poets have taken up the mantle of abstraction and erudition while workshop poets have attempted to capture raw feeling; that the institution of the university has proved hospitable to poets of all stripes; and that “anti-workshop” poets have begun to be taught in university classes that students take alongside their workshops. In this climate, Graham has been, as Orr somewhat sneeringly puts it, “a uniter not a divider.” In her online interview with the journal *Smartish Pace*, Graham picks up where Lowell was left “hanging on a question mark” between two visions of poetry. “I feel very little need to follow encampments,” she writes, continuing that,

In the long view, [mainstream and avant-garde] techniques are the various voices of one body, of a people, in a language, in a moment of history. They have come out of political or theoretical thinking, yes, but they have been transmuted through persons, temperaments, talents, experiences.

In the end it is the voice you hear—the style is the personhood—even if it wants to eschew personhood. That is what moves, persuades. That is, too, what makes a young poet want to be influenced by this poet rather than that. Even to take stylistic devices from this poet rather than that.

As for whether it’s responsible? Influence is influence—it’s a contagion—it’s a form of love—stop it and you stop the flow of future poetry. A hundred years from now these differences will be footnotes, it will all look much more alike then it now seems. Or so I think.

While Graham’s studiedly non-partisan statement would certainly be viewed as political by those whose commitments she suggests are a bit juvenile, her assertion does show that workshop culture’s characteristic quality should perhaps be thought of not in terms of aesthetic closure, but instead in terms of a particular capacity for openness. Within the university, with its ability to take a long view of human culture; within the inherently pluralistic space of the discussion-based classroom, in which a diversity of reception is impossible to ignore; and within the interactive culture of creative writing academia, where the role of the poet is shown to be personal and

embodied simply by virtue of physical presence, fixed aesthetic programs can be easily dismantled. What remains, as Graham suggests, for better or worse, is an unstable, unreliable, hard-won notion of personhood.

The six poets discussed here—Lowell, Plath, Sexton, Roethke, Hugo, and Graham—have each shaped and been shaped by the institution of the poetry workshop, in their work and in their lives. An institution that has proved itself a durable feature of our contemporary literary culture, the workshop will no doubt continue to inspire poets to question whether “it can be taught,” and, if so, what the meaning and value is of teaching it. In so doing, it will structure the shape of a host of essential debates about the nature of lyric subjectivity, literary vocation, charismatic authority, and the relation between literature and the culture that makes up its practitioners daily lives.

Notes to Chapter Five

-
- ¹ Quoted in “Biography of Jorie Graham,” Poetry Foundation, 2011. <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/jorie-graham>>
- ² James Tate, quoted on jacket copy for Jorie Graham, *The Dream of the Unified Field* (New York: Ecco Press, 1995).
- ³ Stephen Burt, “Jorie Graham, *The Dream of the Unified Field*,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 1996.
- ⁴ James Logenbach, “The Wasted Land,” *The New York Times*, April 6, 2008.
- ⁵ Deborah Phelps, “Jorie Graham,” in *Multicultural Writers Since 1945: An A-to-Z Guide*, ed. Alba Della Fazia Amoia and Bettina Liebowitz Knapp (New York: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), 248.
- ⁶ Stephen Schiff, “Big Poetry,” *The New Yorker*, July 14 1997, 62.
- ⁷ Robert Caspar, “About Jorie Graham: A Profile,” *Ploughshares* (Winter 2001–2002).
- ⁸ Alan Cordle, et al. Foetry.com. <www.foetry.com>
- ⁹ Schiff, “Big Poetry,” 62.
- ¹⁰ Weber, “The Routinization of Charisma.”
- ¹¹ Jorie Graham, *Erosion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 29, 40.
- ¹² Schiff, “Big Poetry,” 64.
- ¹³ Katie Ford, “Katie Ford on Jorie Graham,” in *Women Poets on Mentorship*, ed. Arielle Greenberg and Rachel Zucker (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2008), 38.
- ¹⁴ Helen Vendler, “Jorie Graham: The Moment of Excess,” in *Jorie Graham: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. Thomas Gardner (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 52.
- ¹⁵ This phrase recalls the title of an essay by Lyn Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure,” which serves as an apt description of Graham’s process aesthetics.
- ¹⁶ Calvin Bediant, “Postlyrically Yours: Review of *Materialism*,” in Gardner, *Jorie Graham: Essays*, 40.
- ¹⁷ Jorie Graham, *The End of Beauty* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1987), 18.
- ¹⁸ Graham, *The End of Beauty*, 17.
- ¹⁹ See McGurl, *The Program Era*, for a fascinating discussion of “point-of-view” as a node of signification of workshop practices, aesthetics, and meanings.
- ²⁰ Graham, *The End of Beauty*, 19.
- ²¹ Graham, *The End of Beauty*, 24.
- ²² Graham, *The End of Beauty*, 23.
- ²³ Graham, *The End of Beauty*, 68.
- ²⁴ Barbara Clayton, *A Penelopean Poetics: Reweaving the Feminine in Homer’s Odyssey* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 39.
- ²⁵ In this sense, Graham’s Penelope poems could represent the feminization of poetry via the workshop that Robert Lowell’s patriarchal models of literary inheritance implicitly opposed (despite Lowell’s own Penelope-like revision habits). Certainly, too, an inability to finish writing because of the interruptions of life has been a concern about women’s authorship at least since Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, and a problem that the workshop’s emphasis on revision and reworking could serve to exacerbate.
- ²⁶ Graham, *The End of Beauty*, 48.
- ²⁷ James Logenbach, “Jorie Graham’s Big Hunger,” in Gardner, *Jorie Graham: Essays*, 84.

-
- ²⁸ Helen Vendler, "Indigo, Cyanine, Beryl: Review of *Never*," in Gardner, *Jorie Graham: Essays*, 172.
- ²⁹ Vendler, "Indigo," 176.
- ³⁰ Vendler, "Indigo," 184.
- ³¹ "Poets' Q&A with Jorie Graham" *Smartish Pace: A Poetry Review*. n.d. <
http://www.smartishpace.com/pqa/jorie_graham/>
- ³² David Orr, "Jorie Graham: Superstar," *The New York Times Book Review*, April 24, 2005.
- ³³ Graham, Jorie. *Materialism*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 4.
- ³⁴ The public radio program "The Writer's Almanac" is a rich source of poems in this subgenre.
- ³⁵ Halpern, *Everyday and Prophetic*, 240.
- ³⁶ Thomas Gardner, "The Art of Poetry No. 85: Jorie Graham," *The Paris Review* No. 165, (Spring 2003).
- ³⁷ Graham, *Materialism*, 7.
- ³⁸ Caspar, "About Jorie Graham."
- ³⁹ David James, forum post, foetry.com.
- ⁴⁰ Gardner, "The Art of Poetry."
- ⁴¹ Helen Vendler, *The Given and the Made* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
- ⁴² Ulrich Beck, quoted in McGurl, *The Program Era*, 12.
- ⁴³ For a critical history and analysis of the "life poem" in twentieth-century poetry, see Paul Jaussen, "Abiding Song: Evolutions of the Life Poem." PhD diss., University of Washington, 2010.
- ⁴⁴ Timothy Cahill, "Interview with Jorie Graham," *The Christian Science Monitor* Vol 88 (1996).

Bibliography

- Alexander, Paul. *Rough Magic*. New York: Penguin Group, 1991.
- Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by Francis Joseph Sheed. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2006.
- Axelrod, Stephen Gould. "Introduction." In *The Critical Response to Robert Lowell*, edited by Stephen Gould Axelrod. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999.
- Barnhisel, Greg. *James Laughlin, New Directions, and the Remaking of Ezra Pound*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005.
- Barr, John. "American Poetry in the New Century." *Poetry* 188 no. 5 (September 2006).
- Batuman, Elif. "Get a Real Degree" (Review of *The Program Era*). *London Review of Books* Vol. 32 No. 18 (September 23, 2010), 3–8.
- Beach, Christopher. *Poetic Culture: Contemporary American Poetry Between Community and Institution*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1999.
- Beachy-Quick, Dan. "A Pedagogy Torments Itself with a Question That Questions Itself." In *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*, edited by Joshua Marie Wilkinson. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010.
- Bediant, Calvin. "Postlyrically Yours: Review of *Materialism*." In *Jorie Graham: Essays on the Poetry*, edited by Thomas Gardner, 38–41. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.
- Bernstein, Charles. *Content's Dream*. Chicago, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001.
- Bidart, Frank. "Introduction: 'You Didn't Write, You Rewrote.'" In Lowell, Robert. *Collected Poems*. Edited by Frank Bidart and David Gewanter. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

- Bishop, Wendy, and David Starkey. *Keywords In Creative Writing*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2006.
- Bloom, Harold. *American Women Poets*. New York: Chelsea House, 1986.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Homo Academicus*. Translated by Peter Collier. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Translated by Susan Emanuel. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996.
- Burt, Stephen. "Jorie Graham, *The Dream of the Unified Field*." *Times Literary Supplement*, 1996.
- Caspar, Robert. "About Jorie Graham: A Profile." *Ploughshares* (Winter 2001–2002).
- Clayton, Barbara. *A Penelopean Poetics: Reweaving the Feminine in Homer's Odyssey*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004.
- Dana, Robert, ed. *A Community Of Writers : Paul Engle And The Iowa Writers' Workshop*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999.
- Davis, Barbara Thompson. "Carolyn Kizer, The Art of Poetry No. 81" (Interview). *The Paris Review* No. 154 (Spring 2000).
- Davison, Peter. *The Fading Smile: Poets in Boston 1955–1960*. New York: Knopf, 1994.
- Dawson, Paul. *Creative Writing And The New Humanities*. London, New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Dickey, James. "Review of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*." In *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*,

- edited by Steven E. Colburn. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988.
- Engle, Paul. "Poet and Professor Overture." *Poetry* 79 no. 5 (February, 1952).
- Epstein, Andrew. *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Eyle, Alexandra. "The Art of Poetry No. 68: W.D. Snodgrass" (Interview). *The Paris Review* No. 130 (Spring 1994).
- Ford, Katie. "Katie Ford on Jorie Graham." In *Women Poets on Mentorship: Efforts and Affections*, edited by Arielle Greenberg and Rachel Zucker. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2008.
- Gardner, Thomas, ed. *Jorie Graham: Essays on the Poetry*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.
- Gill, Jo, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Gill, Jo. "'My Sweeney, Mr. Eliot': Anne Sexton and the 'Impersonal Theory of Poetry,'" *Journal of Modern Literature* Volume 27, No. 1/2 (Fall 2003): 36–56.
- Gill, Jo. *Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetics*. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2007.
- Gizzi, Peter. "In Thought a Fine Human Brow is Like the East When Troubled with the Morning." In *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*, edited by Joshua Marie Wilkinson. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010.
- Golden, Amanda. "Annotating Modernism: The Reading and Teaching Strategies of Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and Anne Sexton." PhD diss., University of Washington, 2009.
- Golding, Alan. *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.

- Graff, Gerald. "What We Talk About When We Don't Talk About Creative Writing." *College English* 71 no. 3 (January 2009), 271–79.
- Graff, Gerald. *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*. Twentieth Anniversary Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Graham, Jorie. *Erosion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- Graham, Jorie. *Materialism*. Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1993.
- Graham, Jorie. *The End of Beauty*. Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1987.
- Greenberg, Arielle. "A (Slightly Qualified) Defense of MFA Programs: Six Benefits of Graduate School." *Poets.org—Poetry, Poems, Bios & More*. n.d.
<<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5894>>.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Gridley, Sarah. "March Hares and Wild Trout." In *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*, edited by Joshua Marie Wilkinson. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010.
- Guillory, John. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Hall, Donald. "Poetry and Ambition." *Kenyon Review* 5, no. 4 (1983).
- Halpern, Nick. *Everyday and Prophetic: The Poetry of Lowell, Ammons, Merrill, and Rich*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003.
- Hammer, Langdon. *Hart Crane & Allen Tate: Janus-Faced Modernism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Harper, Graeme and Jeri Kroll, eds. *Creative Writing Studies : Practice, Research And Pedagogy*. Clevedon, UK and Buffalo, NY: Multilingual Matters, 2008.

- Hejinian, Lyn. "A Rejection of Closure." In *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, vol 2, edited by Jahan Ramazani, et al. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003.
- Hugo, Richard. *Making Certain It Goes On: The Collected Poems of Richard Hugo*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007.
- Hugo, Richard. *The Triggering Town*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1979.
- Kane, Daniel. *All Poets Welcome : The Lower East Side Poetry Scene In The 1960s*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- Kevles, Barbara. "The Art of Poetry: Anne Sexton." (Interview). In *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*, edited by J.D. McClatchy. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978.
- Kitteredge, William. "Interview with Richard Hugo." In *The Real West Marginal Way*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1992.
- Kooser, Ted. *The Poetry Home Repair Manual: Practical Advice for Beginning Poets*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2007.
- Leahy, Anna, ed. *Power And Identity In The Creative Writing Classroom : The Authority Project*. Clevedon, UK and Buffalo, NY: Multilingual Matters, 2005.
- Logenbach, James. "Jorie Graham's Big Hunger." In *Jorie Graham: Essays on the Poetry*, edited by Thomas Gardner, 82–101. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.
- Logenbach, James. "The Wasted Land." *The New York Times*, April 6, 2008.
- Lowell, Robert. "Anne Sexton." In *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, edited by Steven E. Colburn. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988.
- Lowell, Robert. "National Book Award Acceptance Speech." 1960. *National Book Foundation*.
http://www.nationalbook.org/nbaacceptspeech_rlowell.html.

- Lowell, Robert. "Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*." In *Collected Prose*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987.
- Lowell, Robert. *Collected Poems*. Edited by Frank Bidart and David Gewanter. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.
- Lowell, Robert. *Collected Prose*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987.
- Lowell, Robert. *The Letters of Robert Lowell*. Edited by Saskia Hamilton. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005.
- Mariani, Paul. *Lost Puritan: A Life of Robert Lowell*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996.
- Marx, Patricia. "Interview with Anne Sexton." In *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*., edited by J.D. McClatchy. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978.
- Mayers, Tim. *(Re)Writing Craft : Composition, Creative Writing, And The Future Of English Studies*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005.
- McGurl, Mark. "The MFA Octopus: Four Questions about Creative Writing." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 11, 2011. < <http://lareviewofbooks.org/article.php?id=200>>
- McGurl, Mark. *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- McHugh, Heather. "On Creative Writing Programs" (Letter to the Editor). *The American Scholar* 76. 2 (Spring 2007).
- Meyers, Jeffrey, ed. *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988.
- Middlebrook, Diane Wood. *Anne Sexton: A Biography*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.
- Moxley, Jennifer. "Poundian Poetic Ambition on the Semester System." In *Poets on Teaching: A*

- Sourcebook*, edited by Joshua Marie Wilkinson. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010.
- Myers, D.G. *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996.
- National Council of Teachers of English. *Creative Writing In America: Theory And Pedagogy*. National Council of Teachers of English, 1989.
- Nelson, Deborah. "Plath, History, and Politics." In *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, edited by Jo Gill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- O'Connell, Nicholas. *At the Field's End: Interviews with 22 Pacific Northwest Writers* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1998).
- Oliver, Mary. *A Poetry Handbook*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1994.
- Perloff, Marjorie. "Amato/Fleischer Too Pessimistic (Riposte to 'Reforming Creative Writing Pedagogy')." *Electronic Book Review*. August 17, 2002.
<<http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/endconstruction/carnets>>
- Perloff, Marjorie. "Poètes Maudits of the Genteel Tradition: Lowell and Berryman." In *Robert Lowell: Essays on the Poetry*, edited by Stephen Gould Axelrod and Helen Deese. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *Differentials : Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *Poetry On and Off the Page: Essays for Emergent Occasions*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1998.
- Phelps, Deborah. "Jorie Graham." In *Multicultural Writers Since 1945: An A-to-Z Guide*, edited

- by Alba Della Fazia Amoia and Bettina Liebowitz Knapp. New York: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004.
- Plath, Sylvia. "Above the Oxbow." In *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Collected Poems*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1992.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, edited by Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor Books, 2000.
- Ransom, John Crowe. "A Look Backwards and a Note of Hope." In *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, ed. Jeffrey Meyers. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988.
- Ransom, John Crowe. "Criticism, Inc." In *Praising It New*, edited by Garrick Davis., Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008.
- Ransom, John Crowe. "Mr. Tate and the Professors." *Kenyon Review* Vol. 2, No. 3 (Summer, 1940).
- Retallack, Joan, and Juliana Spahr, eds. *Poetry and Pedagogy: The Challenge of the Contemporary*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
- Rifkin, Libbie. *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-Garde*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000.
- Ritter, Kelly, and Stephanie Vanderslice, eds. *Can It Really Be Taught? Resisting Lore in Creative Writing Pedagogy*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2007.
- Ritter, Kelly, and Stephanie Vanderslice, eds. *College English*. Special Issue: Creative Writing. Bloomington, IN: National Council of Teachers of English, January 2009. Volume 71 Number 3.

- Roethke, Theodore. *Collected Poems*. New York: Anchor Books, 1970.
- Roethke, Theodore. Manuscript Collection. University of Washington Libraries Special Collections.
- Roethke, Theodore. *On Poetry and Craft*. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2001).
- Roethke, Theodore. *Straw for the Fire: From the Notebooks of Theodore Roethke*. Edited by David Wagoner. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2006.
- Rosenthal, M.L. "Poetry as Confession." *The Nation* vol. 189 issue 8 (September 1959): 154–155.
- Salvio, Paula M. *Anne Sexton: Teacher of Weird Abundance*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007.
- Schiff, Stephen. "Big Poetry." *The New Yorker*, July 14 1997, 60–67.
- Seager, Allan. *The Glass House*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1991.
- Seidel, Frederick. "The Art of Poetry: Robert Lowell" (Interview). In *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, edited by Jeffrey Meyers. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988.
- Sexton, Anne. "Classroom at Boston University." In *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, edited by Jeffrey Meyers. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988.
- Sexton, Anne. *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*. Edited by Lois Ames and Linda Gray Sexton. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1994.
- Shapiro, Karl. "Editorial Note." *Poetry* 79 no. 5 (February, 1952).
- Shaw, Lytle. *Frank O'Hara: the Poetics of Coterie*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2006.
- Shellnut, Eve. "Notes from a Cell: Creative Writing Programs in Isolation." In *Creative Writing*

- in America*, edited by Joseph M. Moxley. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1989.
- Shivani Anis. *Against the Workshop: Provocations, Polemics, Controversies*. Austin: Texas Review Press, 2011.
- Shivani, Anis. "Creative Writing Programs: Is the MFA System Corrupt and Undemocratic?" *The Huffington Post*. October 23, 2010 < http://www.huffingtonpost.com/anis-shivani/creative-writing-programs-corrupt_b_757653.html>.
- Silliman, Ron. "Canons and Institutions." In *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, edited by Charles Bernstein. New York: Roof Books, 1989.
- Smartish Pace: A Poetry Review*. "Poets' Q&A with Jorie Graham." n.d. <http://www.smartishpace.com/pqa/jorie_graham/>
- Spears, Monroe K. "W.H. Auden at Swarthmore." *Swarthmore College Bulletin* (March 1962): 2–6.
- Spivack, Kathleen. "Poets and Friends." In *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, edited by Steven E. Colburn. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988.
- Swenson, Cole. "Creative Unknowing." In *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*, edited by Joshua Marie Wilkinson. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010.
- Tillinghast, Richard. "Robert Lowell in the Sixties." In *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, ed. Jeffrey Meyers, 261–65. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988.
- Vanderslice, Stephanie. *Rethinking Creative Writing in Education: Programs and Practices That Work*. New York: The Professional and Higher Partnership Ltd, 2011.
- Vendler, Helen. "Indigo, Cyanine, Beryl: Review of *Never*." In *Jorie Graham: Essays on the Poetry*, edited by Thomas Gardner, 170–184. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.

- Vendler, Helen. "Jorie Graham: The Moment of Excess." In *Jorie Graham: Essays on the Poetry*, edited by Thomas Gardner, 42–59. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.
- Vendler, Helen. "Lowell in the Classroom." In *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, ed. Jeffrey Meyers, 288–97. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988.
- Von Hallberg, Robert. *American Poetry and Culture, 1945–1980*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.
- Wandor, Michelene. *The Author Is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else: Creative Writing Reconceived*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Warner, Michael. *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books, 2002.
- Weber, Max. "The Routinization of Charisma." In *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building*. Edited by S.N. Eisenstadt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968.
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.
- Wilbers, Stephen. *The Iowa Writers' Workshop: Origins, Emergence & Growth*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1980.
- Wilkinson, Joshua Marie, ed. *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010.
- Williamson, Alan. "Robert Lowell: A Reminiscence." In *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, ed. Jeffrey Meyers, 266–73. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988.