

# WRITING



# EDUCATION

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**Place-based creativity:** Wyl Menmuir on independent writing spaces in schools; Peter Cooley writing in the wake of Hurricane Katrina

**NAWE Conference Collection 2015:** Anne Caldwell; Caroline Carver; Mandy Coe & Kaye Tew; Maureen Fenton; Victoria Field; Elizabeth Forbes; Paul Francis; Mike Harris; Andrea Holland; Gill James; Joan Michelson; Alyson Morris & Tim Kelly

**plus:** Paul Magee on poetry and acting; The Boat Is Coming (Part 2)



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*Cover photo credit: Steve Tanner (see pages 49–52)*

# “Something you’ve already done in the sleep of your life”

## The relation between poetry writing and acting

Paul Magee



I will start with a perhaps heretical comment. Its context is a unit I teach at the University of Canberra entitled *Poetry and the Imagination*. I have taught this unit for twelve years now: The unit’s aim, as its Coleridgean title perhaps suggests, is to induce original composition in verse. The comment is as follows: I am not convinced that peer

feedback has all that much to offer my students.

Creative writing units typically require students to present their writing to the class, on the expectation that they will take guidance from the range of peer responses elicited, and find ways to edit their work accordingly. Facilitating this can be highly frustrating, and I am not the first to say so (see also Adnot-Haynes & Mellas 2010; Irvine 2010; Vanderslice 2010). Student feedback on verse compositions is particularly problematic: haphazard images in prose rhythms are, for instance, regularly applauded on the simple grounds that the student applauding does not realize better are possible. The bulk of the students judge in this manner, according to criteria derived from years of reading novels, at speed. Most have to be taught the very basic facts that verse generally has to be read at a speaking pace, at times even slower (Attridge 1995: 2), and that it most reveals its pleasures when one returns, to reread and dwell (Coleridge 1962: 12). By the time such teaching has

sunk in, most of the semester has gone.

I am referring to a broad cultural illiteracy to do with the avoidances built into our education systems and popular media. One can, it is true, exert a certain teacherly authority in scenarios. The poet Aileen Kelly described an instance, when I interviewed her in Melbourne some years ago:

*I said to a writing group the other day that I felt that—I must admit I was being tough with them—it was as though they were trying to paint a portrait with the skills they learnt painting a living room. They were using words as in prose.<sup>1</sup>*

Sometimes such comments break through—but at the risk, as Kelly implies, of appearing churlish or elitist, and at any rate in basic conflict with a democratic tutorial model developed as a training ground for the back and forth of intellectual conversation, much more than a means for generating genuine, qualitative judgements on individual artworks. I despair of how often I hear the group run with an eager appraisal of lines I know to be unpublishable to say nothing of unmemorable. I despair of how often a student’s honest critiques of such work, especially when acute, are treated by others in the group—with the weight of numbers on their side—as mere statements of personal taste. It is hard to see the learning in such moments.

It was entirely the other way round, I am pleased to report, with the experiment I want to focus this article upon. It will require some backstory. For the twelve years I have taught *Poetry and the Imagination*, students

have been obliged, as a compulsory assessment item, to perform to the class a by-heart recital of one of the poems on the syllabus. I had always suspected this risky and difficult task would have a good effect upon the students' own creative writing. But I had never asked students to give each other feedback on those performances in the minutes immediately following. That is the context. The experiment relates to a change I imported into this teaching practice in 2014, some months after attending an acting workshop run by Shakespeare director, dramaturg and performance scholar, Bridget Escolme<sup>2</sup>. Bridget's workshop opened a door, by bringing home to me at once the skill involved in acting, but also its closeness to what we do and see every day of our lives; its closeness to poetry. I suddenly wanted to know what would happen if I trained that poorly functioning technology of peer feedback on something else, something more to do with acting. I took a guiding role in discussion during the first few assessments (by-heart recitals of poems by Medbh McGuckian, Anne Carson and John Muk Muk Burke), pointing out features to do with moving at a natural pace through the lines, what clarity of diction is necessary for rhythms to be heard, the importance of thinking about how to perform line breaks, the need to allow emotion without swallowing the performance in it, and so forth. What startled me, in the weeks that followed, was how rapidly the twenty-odd students in each class internalized my lead, and began to make persuasive, often highly perceptive, critical comments: "You paced it very well over the first two stanzas, though 'harvest wheat' was a bit swallowed." "You conveyed the emotion of Auden's 'I love you' very well"; "There was something of a monotone creeping in over lines 11 and 12"; "You handled the enjambment from 'the first' to 'are you to turn' beautifully"; "Your staccato really accentuated 'the grill lights'"; "I found 'the heroin whore' particularly well dramatized, in fact the whole run of lines from 19-27." Not only were students making subtle observations. They were acquiring the skill to audit a performance of twenty lines, all the while holding in memory specific moments in that performance, for the sake of critical comment. This led to confident and convincing judgements. I could see the learning before my eyes.

Even more significantly, it was clear that the recitals were themselves improving by the week.

Open, critical discussion of recitals was having an impact not just on the quality of students' judgements as to how others had gone, but on the quality of their very own performances. The sort of competencies I am referring to under the rubric of quality are well illustrated by poetry educator Mario Petrucci's description of an exercise he uses when coaching people to read poetry in public. He calls it "Holding the Thought". It involves two people: one to read the poem, the other to listen. Imagine you are the reader, tasked with performing the first twenty lines of Elizabeth Bishop's "The Moose". The listener stops you, Petrucci explains, "when, in some way, you lose intimate contact with a text you're reading to them out loud." One might create all sorts of variants on this exercise, Petrucci adds, but what is important to all of them is that the listener stops the reader if ever that listener starts to doubt

*that the reader knows, unhesitatingly, exactly where they are and where they're going, that they're utterly inside the text and what it means, rather than feeling their way through it or handing it over in a detached way, as a series of phrases. Indeed, a great recitation comes across as a kind of hologram, where the whole is somehow present in every passing part (Petrucci 2014: 50).*

Interestingly, Petrucci does not seem to feel that such an alert listener is all that hard to come by.

Equally interesting, I find, is the resonance of Petrucci's description of the qualities of "a great recitation" with something Medbh McGuckian wrote me from Belfast when I interviewed her by email earlier this year. This was in relation to a question I had posed her as to whether sight or sound felt uppermost in the moments of composing her verse:

*I believe what happens is what Baudelaire and the symbolists described as association of senses, where a sixth sense is aroused that contains all the others but is a single sensation of learned experience. So they all act as one the words react against and with each other to create a cinematic reality maybe stronger than reality in that it doesn't fade, but stays crystallized in the amber of the words like the Grecian Urn. (McGuckian 2015)*

These comments are not, note, about recital, but about original composition—the composition of poems as dizzyingly new as McGuckian's. But there seems a

strong resonance all the same between that "association of the senses" she describes and Petrucci's "a great recital comes across as a kind of hologram."

But more on composition below.

My point for the moment, to reiterate, is that through auditing and workshopping each others' recitals, my students were rapidly possessed of the critical capacity Petrucci so unproblematically vests in "the listener" to his "holding the thought" exercise. As I said, they rapidly gathered the capacity to point out, with precision (e.g. lines 19-27 of Ginsberg's "An Open Window on Chicago"), those moments when the reciter was "utterly inside the text and what it means", and those when not. They could spot just when that reciter was, as actor Stephen Berkoff put it, "alive" to the words:

*Once "alive" in a scene you can do no wrong, and every actor knows what I mean [...] In these times we are inspired [...] Nothing can shake us and disaster is even welcomed as a challenge. It is an effervescence when all your nerves seem to light up and you score the jackpot; the sluice gates open and the adrenalin is flowing freely. It's almost like a state of grace (Berkoff 1989: 112).*

But it is not simply that my students were by dint of workshopping becoming capable of noting the inspired moments in each others' recitals. They were, as I stated above, creating them in their own.

I put this outcome down to the following, quite obvious, fact. Our students are culturally literate in acting, deeply so, and in direct converse to their illiteracy in the enjoyment, and therefore judging, of verse. We as educators need to think more about this.

Could it be, for instance, that one of the best ways to get contemporary students into the reading and writing of poetry is to concentrate on those aspects of it that most relate to acting? There are a few ways into that idea: expanding the practice of by-heart recital in our teaching is obviously one of them. Another would involve introducing students to the possibility that what they are really doing, when they read poetry at the right, real-time speed to enjoy it, is performing (albeit in their own heads). Poet Mark Reid suggested just that when I interviewed him in Western Australia in 2007: "You

might say there's a theatre in your head in which what you read on the page is performed." I think Reid is right. And I suspect we can take the matter further. For it seems to me, reflecting on some of my interview research with poets, that there is a sort of theatre in each poet's head, and that it is through a kind of improvisational acting there that the lines we read on the page get composed. I think that is what McGuckian is telling us.

Allow me to broach that claim a little digressively, by returning to the apparent paradox I tabled above, and attempting to think it through. There I reported my surprise that the act of analyzing and making judgements on other students' performances actually improved my students' recitals, when it came time for their own. I feel the need to underline this: in my twelve years of setting by-heart performance as an assessment item in the unit, I saw nothing like the extraordinary advance in abilities that flowed upon students' being encouraged to discuss and think through each other's recitals in the minutes immediately following them. Their performances became richer in personality, by way of technical and evaluative discussion.

But in some ways that outcome is just obvious. The fallacy is to imagine that reflexive thinking is *not* present in the moment of creative inspiration. Naomi Cumming's *The Sonic Self: Musical Subjectivity and Signification*, an attempt to theorize the semiotics of virtuoso violin performance, is fascinating on this:

*To be engaged in an act of performance that requires the exercise of highly developed skills is neither to assume a state of forgetfulness towards one's own bodily actions, nor to be absorbed by consciousness of them (Cumming 2000: 35).*

To perform live is not "to assume a state of forgetfulness". But as the second half of the quote makes clear, Cumming equally insists that the reflexive thinker retreat somewhat. It is like, she adds, what happens when acting. She proceeds to quote the ethnographer and philosopher of performance Richard Schechner on what differentiates an enraged Lawrence Olivier shouting "Down Strumpet!" at Desdemona as "he takes up the pillow to murder" her from a rampaging elephant (Schechner, qtd in Cumming 2000: 35). The difference is that part of Olivier "knows he is just acting and as such controls his gestures so that he does not

injure the actress playing Desdemona. Even more, Olivier feels and does not feel rage against the actress" (35). Olivier has clearly "put aside his character as a person external to the play" to take up the role; yet he "does not thereby lose his capacity to monitor the violent gestures he is enacting" (35). His or her monitoring agency, which Schechner refers to as an "I", can, Cumming continues:

*commonly be recognized by an actor engaged in reflection, after an experience. It is known in looking back that a degree of control was enforced by the "self," even though the self who was fully engaged in the act of monitoring could not, in the process, also reflect on its own activities. The "I" (eye) at its centre is blind—as Victor Frankl put it so neatly. I am in an act of which I cannot be self-reflexively aware until it is over. I am in a moment of risk and its monitoring, as the subject of more than one level of consciousness (36).*

This analysis is illuminating, on a number of levels. Firstly, it pinpoints the agency that can, for all the spontaneity of emotion in performance, be trained outside performance in the discriminations such complex and instant action requires: what Schechner refers to as the performer's "knowing half", the half caught up, as part of Olivier must have been when playing Othello, in the task of "performing-the-actions-that-communicate-to-himself-and-to-his-audience-the-emotions-required" (35). Secondly, the analysis shows that this same, educable, eminently discursive agency, can only function at the price of its owner's relinquishing other forms of control in the moment. Cumming thus highlights that performance is *both* something we can learn to do better *and* a moment of radical risk. It is a risk, each and every time, because it involves relinquishing control to an educable I that nonetheless "at its centre is blind".

Actor, director and politician Augusto Boal puts it this way: "Every time an actor plays a character, *he or she plays it for the first and last time*. Like we play every minute of our own lives" (2002: 38).

Is this blindness not at the root of theatre itself?

Isn't that why the experience of it is often so shattering of our commonplaces? Berkoff again:

*I expect that what people mean when they say that an actor*

*has danger is that he does what is unexpected; or, in other words, he is not programmed by the simple responses and conditioning that makes us familiar with what he will do [...] somehow takes us in leaps and bounds to the unexpected since he is releasing the passion that is revolutionary (38).*

Herbert Blau: "What you're looking for is the work which, if isn't reflecting new conditions of existence (perhaps because suspicious of the reflections), is nevertheless determined to shake up the unchangeable" (1982: 26).

Petr Bogatyrev: "One of the most important and fundamental features of the theatre is *transformation*" (1976: 51).

I hasten at this juncture to add the most important thing of all: what also vastly improved over the semester I have been discussing were my students' own original compositions, relative to all prior years in which I had taught the unit. I cannot see any reason for this other than the introduction of peer-generated feedback on recitals. I think it brought my students closer to that place where "The 'I' (eye) at its centre is blind".

At which the broader question all these reflections have been tending toward arises: are original composition and genuine acting at core all that dissimilar?

\*

A final comment, on the point at which the practices of reciting, on the one hand, and composing, on the other, seem most clearly dissimilar.

Surely any equation between the two falls apart the second we compare the original text one somehow dreams up in the moments of composition, and the received script one works with in front of an audience, a script as received as Hedda's, or Hamlet's, or Blanche DuBois'.

Does it?

Marguerite Duras:

*When you're writing a kind of instinct comes into play. What you're going to write is already there in the darkness [...] It's not a matter of passing from one state to another. It's a matter*

of deciphering something already there, something you've already done in the sleep of your life, in its organic rumination, unbeknown to you (Duras 1993: 25).

Isn't there something like a memorized script there, prior to and insistent within Duras' description of the act of original composition?

"Like we play every minute of our own lives."

### Notes

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2. Bridget is Reader in Drama at the University of London. Her workshop, "Displaying Early Modern Emotion: the challenges of *Measure for Measure* in contemporary performance", offered participants a hands-on experience of certain issues in Shakespearean dramaturgy. It was keynote to the *Finding the Fourth Dimension: Learning through Practice in the Arts and the Humanities* conference convened by Kate Flaherty at the Australian National University on 25 July, 2014.

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