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Creative Wreading & Aesthetic Judgment

I am professor of poetry. I take that term quite literally. I profess poetry in a society, and often a classroom, where poetry is at best a half-forgotten thing, something confined to the peripheries of cultural imagination, a once grand enterprise perhaps, but today eclipsed by more compelling media. Many readers – current students and long ago graduates alike, those who have never been to school and those who teach school – have no experience at all with poetry and certainly little contact with poetry as an active contemporary art form. Indeed, college is a crucial site for the introduction, the continuing re-introduction, to poetry in both its historical and contemporary particulars.

A poem is a work of art using words (or related verbal materials). New poems often challenge prior definitions or understandings of poetry. Another way of saying this is that a poem is any verbal construction that is designated as a poem. The designation of a verbal text as poetry cues a way of reading but does not address the work's quality. Disagreement over the nature of what poetry is, or what constitutes a poem, is as much a part of the history of poetry as disputes about what makes a good poem. The most contentious of these disputes are fundamental to poetry's continuing social and aesthetic significance.

Confronted with a poem, many seem to go silent or what they say tends to treat the poem as if it were not a poem at all but a statement of opinion, experience, or sentiment; or a cultural artifact of a time more benighted than our own that can perhaps give us a glimmer of the dim consciousness that guided those in days gone by. It's as if these readers were trying to access a Windows program with DOS tools, not realizing that you can click on the icons not just scroll up and down and type in commands at a prompt line. Or it is as if the poems, with sound and in color, were being viewed with a silent monochrome screen.

My response to this chronic poetic aporia (CPA) is to provide intensive poetry immersion courses, something like teaching poetry as a second language. That means I try to immerse the class in a wide yet distinct variety of poetic forms, sounds, dictions, and logics.

I am committed to bring into play the performance of poetry – both the reader's performance of the printed poem and the poet's performance at a reading, in this way also bringing into the discussion the histories of performed poetry. At PennSound <writing.upenn.edu/pennsound>, and other web sites, sound files of poetry readings are available to use in conjunction with printed texts. Still, there is nothing like having live readings and discussions with poets as part of the class. (I find it helpful to assign a book by the visiting poet before the visit and have that form the basis for an active conversation either before or after the reading.) There is no more powerful way to bring home the materialities of voice or the specificities of the contemporary than through a reading. Readings offer a concrete countermeasure to the relentless abstraction and reification of the poem as something existing disembodied in an anthology. The lessons of the live poetry reading are significant for historical and contemporary poetry, since they provide a model for imagining poems not just as meaning formations but as social productions and material texts, and can provide a very concrete introduction to the study of literary works through both their bibliographic and performance contexts.

As for the art of reading, I try to create possibilities for reading as creative performance and as a ground for subsequent critical interpretation, based on the aesthetic principle – *you can't interpret what you don't experience*. Many new, but also many highly experienced, readers of poetry have a difficult time accessing the poetic strata of a work, that is, those elements that make a piece of writing a poem as opposed to ... well let's just say prose. To counter this anaesthesia, I have a threefold plan.

First, I ask students to do interactive and creative responses to assigned readings, including imitations, memorizations, rearrangements, word or phrase substitutions, homolinguistic (English to English) translations/transpositions, and other “wreading” experiments that involve reordering or rearranging a poem's words, lines or stanzas, as well as locating or isolating certain key linguistic, figurative, and rhetorical features of the poem. (A list of wreading experiments is available at <writing.upenn.edu/bernstein/wreading-experiments.html>.) The point here is both to investigate the recombinant structure of a poem – to what extent it retains its identity through modification of its constituent elements – and also to allow for a more intuitive, even visceral, contact with the materials of the poem, call it “sounding” the poems, as Thoreau speaks of sounding Walden Pond.

The Poem Profiler <writing.upenn.edu/library/Bernstein-Charles_Poem-Profiler.html> is the second fold of Creative Wreading. The Poem Profiler is a delirious

extension of New Criticism, one of whose significant virtues was a focus on the formal and linguistic features of a poem. I developed the profiler in response to the paucity of terms many students, not to say readers, have for discussing poems. In reading a poem, I ask students to assess the levels of a wide range of rhetorical features. “The Poem Profiler” has ten overall categories and over 125 individual features: “Stylistic Textures and Poetic Diction” includes such items as ambiguity, humor, eloquence, plainness, sincerity, smoothness versus roughness, bumpiness, striation; and subtlety versus bluntness. “Content” assesses the main types of subject matter in the poem. “Developmental / temporal / compositional structures” assesses what holds the poem together – is it fragmentary or expository, stream of consciousness or dream-like/surreal, fast paced or jerky, procedural or employing traditional forms? The profiler also inventories “devices” from irony to hyperbole, simile to metonymy. The “mood/tone” features are given as contrasting pairs as in scary/reassuring, dark/light, impersonal/emotional, turbulent/calm. “Counting” is a way to note various features of a poem that are organized by number while “visual shape/form” asks for an account of the physical arrangement of the poem on the page. In “sound,” the acoustic elements of the poem are assessed, while point of view assesses whether there is a narrator, persona, first-person, and the like. Finally, in the most explicitly un-New Critical gesture, I have a list of socio-historical contexts to consider.

The Poem Profiler Profiler is a guide to the perplexed and hopefully not a perplexing guide. The profiler is not meant to be applied to every poem or else it could become a tool for rote, laborious, micro-analysis of a given poem. For that reason, I suggest doing comprehensive profiling on only a couple of poems. After that, the profiler should be used as a resource to add specificity to more open-ended responses to poems, through journal responses and interactive experiments and performances. For the Poem Profiler is not just a delirious form of close reading, it is also an approach to literary criticism as a form of thick description, in several senses of the term: dense (you don’t get it do you, huh?), richly detailed, and opaque. Criticism should be at least as opaque as the poem and twice as opaque as the reader.

In the first class, I ask the students to run the profiler on themselves, to gauge their current preferences. In going over the results, hours can be spent defining, expanding, and detouring the terms. I go through the whole profiler, asking students not only to give their rating for each term but also to make up an example to illustrate what the term means. I am fascinated by the occasional student who marks everything “5,” since it’s close to unimaginable that anyone would like all the possible qualities of a poem equally, irreverence and much as piety. Such a response suggests a lack of engagement with, or confidence in, one’s own aesthetic judgment. The value of the exercise is that it makes explicit the set of aesthetic values each reader brings to a poem and helps to explore how these affects each of the evaluation of, and more important the response to, a poem. For this reason, the profiler may enable some students to appreciate that a poem achieves, to a significant degree, something that he or she rated very low on the profiler.

The profiler also can provoke a discussion of why some poets choose poetic values that are not necessarily highly rated on an individual student’s initial self-assessment. Indeed, the different ratings students give to the same poetic feature makes palpable that there is no consensus in the class on what factors are valued in a poem. In

the Wreading Workshop, disagreement is encouraged as a way of generating exchange rather than an obstacle that needs to be overcome. Disagreement is not a means to a consensus (or the imposed consensus of the professor's judgment): dissensus is the goal of the Wreading Workshop. I always try to give extended attention to the negative reactions that students have to a poem or set of poems. By emphasizing the range of disagreements in the initial self-assessment via the profiler, it becomes apparent at the start that disagreement is as much a product of initial orientation as of the qualities of any given poem studied. Since I often ask students to rank the poems they read for a given week in order of their preference, the profiler provides a means to pursue the basis of these initial judgments. Asking about preferences is just a beginning, however; the more useful question is asking students to articulate (if necessary with the help of the profiler) the criteria for their preference. The next step is to explore the relation between initial preferences and quality assessment by asking whether a student's initial preferences for one set of poetic textures is a sufficient basis for determining the aesthetic value of a poem. After a while, most students will acknowledge the value of a poem whose profile is aversive to their own initial preferences. Some students may even, as the class progresses, choose to reset the factory preset aesthetic preferences in the options menu of their Imaginary.

(Beyond the second fold, which is not a school activity, is to reconfigure that options menu so that it works as a dynamic, nonlinear system. Basic reprogramming skills are required.)

As with all wreading exercises, the value of the poem profiler diminishes when the work it generates ceases to be engaging and exploratory. The point is not that all poetic study needs to be fun but that thematic or formal analysis needs to be connected with the experiential dimension of the poem. In many cases, it would be better to have a student read a poem out loud, type it out, or repeatedly play a recording of it than to write a paper trying to figure out its meaning. I don't see much use, in poetry teaching, of exams, test identifications, or traditional theme-based papers. By *experience* I mean a movement away from a summary of what the poem is about or a catalog of its devices or images or conceits and toward the sound and tone and mood of the poem perceived intuitively, as one hears a song without necessarily concentrating on it or being able to say what it is about. Concentration may be an obstacle to the sort of ambient reading that is a fundamental prerequisite to accessing the experiential dimension of a poem. Without access to this dimension, analysis is worthless: it may say something about the "idea" of a poem but cannot engage a poem's inner life. Scholarship and interpretation are of tremendous value, but they need to be informed by tone and rhythm as much as theme.

Favorite poems I have read and taught many times remain opaque to me or I forget whatever conclusions I may have come to upon earlier readings. It's often the case that I have no idea what a line means or why exactly it appeals to me. In the Wreading workshop, such nonunderstanding flourishes. Reading ambiently and associatively rather than rationally and systematically, a poem may come to life even as it remains out of our grasp. Paradoxically, the harder we try to grasp a poem's meaning, the more elusive it may become. Given that most students are drilled to think in a linear and logical manner and to express themselves in directly expressive or expository prose, the wreading workshop becomes one of the very few sites at a university that encourages and explores intuitive thinking and writing; its not that such poetic work is better than rationalistic or

directly expressive work, but it provides a necessary counter to the dominance of one type of knowledge over others.

The final, or third, fold of Creative Wreading is weekly intensive journal entries in which the students respond to each week's assigned readings, and the supplemental material posted on the on-line syllabus. As with the Wreading experiments and the poems profiler studies, I ask that all student work be posted directly to a common class listserve or web log. In this way, everything that I see as the teacher is also seen by all students. Nothing is private. The most radical result of the public postings is that students direct their comments to each other, rather than the professor/authority figure. The class discussion extends and intensifies on-line; it might even be more accurate to say that class discussion is an extension of the on-line discussion.

I emphasize to students that the week's responses are meant to be spontaneous, informal, and unedited. These notebooks entries are not drafts for papers, nor are they necessarily expository. Fragments, lists, incomplete thoughts are fine – in the service of noting reactions and thoughts. The purpose of the writing is to encourage interaction with the poems and also serve as a record of individual reading.

Creative Wreading actively counters the fear that “difficult” or “negative” poetry is harder for students to engage than simple or affirmative poetry. In a Creative Wreading environment, difficulty means more layers with which to grapple and therefore more opportunities for a multilevel engagement with a poem. When reading poetry is not directed to the goal of deciphering a fixed, graspable meaning but rather encourages performing and responding to overlapping meanings, then difficulty ceases to be an obstacle and is transformed into an opening.

Adapted from an essay in *Poetry and Pedagogy: The Challenge of the Contemporary*, ed. Joan Retallack and Juliana Spahr (New York: Palgrave, 2006).

Wreading, Writing, Wresponding

I. Writing

Laptops are open and everyone's on-line and chattering away at the same time. I pass around a yellow pad and it circulates from one person to the next, in zigzag order, for the length of the seminar. The participants are writing an ongoing serial collaboration and will continue to work on this, during the class, for the full 14 weeks we meet. Each week one student takes the pages home and posts a verbatim transcription and an edited version. From my laptop I project, on the large LCD display screen, the index of the class listserv, to which everyone has posted their work for the week.

Each week students write works based on the experiments list writing.upenn.edu/bernstein/experiments.html, a set of constraints and procedures, which has served as a foundation for much my undergraduate teaching over the past 20 years. You could call this class "creative writing," but I resist the label since it comes with all the weight of the prototypical poetry workshop, which is often focused on content-based exercises rather than experiments in form. *Write a poem about the first time you saw your Dad shaving*: "the blood dripped down his face / and I trembled in the corner, / unseen, whimpering." Not being particularly interested in sincerity, description, or traditional craft, I've long made a point of teaching modernist and contemporary poetry classes rather than writing classes, but the twist is that these literature classes – what I call "creative (w)reading" workshops – are run as if they were creative writing classes (students write creatively in response to the readings, but the focus is entirely on poems assigned).

Over time, you see, I've become more interested in small seminars devoted just to the students experiments and so, through a kind of trap back door, which I've fallen through, tripping up my apparent prejudices, I've ended up in a very common space of creative writing (poetry), which I simply call "Writing Experiments Seminar" – or English 111, after the number of the room in which we meet.

My phobia to creative writing poetry workshops, like all phobias, is exaggerated and no doubt unfair to the eccentric range offered under the rubric; but I cling to it as an untrustworthy friend. But then again I know what I don't like. I am so stubborn that I am sure if someone advised me on how to improve a poem I'd probably do the opposite, just out of sheer contrariness. From the get-go I tell 111 participants that writing good poems, or learning to write better poems, or learning the craft of poetry, or improving your work, is not the focus or goal of the seminar (but it may happen as a by-product). I think of 111 as a non-expository writing class, or a course in anti- or para- or pluricomposition, something, if I had *my way* (and not just a book by that name), I would require as an antidote to Freshman Comp. The class has its value not for budding poets, only, or primarily, or exclusively, but also for all writers. It's less a workshop than a lab, with experiments in mutant forms conducted on the textual body of the living language. (I play the role of a kinder, gentler Frankenstein.) Still, as an elective course, the students who enroll in it think of the class as a poetry class, since that is the only academic slot associated with what one of the students likes to call abnormal writing, but I prefer to think of as r & d (research and development). I figure the more you know how to take words apart and put them together, the more aspects of language you've turned up, down, left, right, inside out, and outside in, the better you will be able to respond to the many

contingencies, screw balls and curve balls and monkey wrenches, that language will inevitably throw your way. Like my main man says, Whose in control, me or the words? (*Whose* is, that's who.) And then – I am slowly getting around to the subject of teaching modernist poetry – an approach like this makes for pro-active readers by potentiating pro-active approaches to writing. So, yeah, busted again: this is just another kind of lit'r'ature class, a reading workshop not so much in disguise as in drag.

Let me circle back to the question of craft and improvement. The scene: my grossly caricatured creative writing workshop, led by a teacher who (unlike me) knows good from bad and (also unlike me) prefers the good. A teacher who's not afraid to tell a student what she's doing wrong and how to fix it. I have my tastes too but am wary of legislating them, since I know they are minority tastes, particular and eccentric tastes, and I don't expect students to share them, much less adopt them. I try as much as possible to steer discussions away from good or bad and don't, as a rule, give my opinions about quality or improvement. I do the best I can to direct attention to what is happening in the work, alternative means of construction, and the possibilities of the form.

And I encourage distractions and digressions. Something reminds someone of a cartoon on the web so they turn their laptops around and play that. That reminds me of my boyhood in ancient Greece, so I carry on about etymologies. And I do tend to wax aesthetic and philosophical about any or all of the forms employed; and have a trigger finger ready to fire off examples from modernist and contemporary poetry, many of which I have linked to the web syllabus. Someone laughs, after reading something funny on the yellow-pad collaboration being passed around, or maybe in a text message sent from one class member to another, or maybe just at one of my innumerable, problematic jokes. Laughter is the necessary yeast of good class conversation and opens the possibility for listening, not just hearing.

The best advice I can give to the student in a conventional creative writing workshop is that if your peers or teacher tell you not to do something, because that something doesn't make sense to them, appears as a blur, then probably the thing you need to do is *not cut it out* but pursue it: develop. (But then some teachers will tell you that in a more conventional workshop and others won't in a more experimental one.) Something germinal in a young writer isn't necessarily, or even usually, going to make sense even to the most open-minded teacher or generous class mate. Often the most problematic things about a germinal work has the greatest potential for development. That is why the typical workshop environment, with cross-comments toward creating a "better" piece of writing, that is, one that a group will agree is "better" (more fluid, less awkward, clearer, more logical or expressive, more direct) runs counter to poetic invention and aesthetic process, which will more likely (but not necessarily) produce work that is not legible by such workshop criteria. But you can rely on something: the quizzical, puzzled, and overtly negative responses are signs you are on to something.

How many creative writing workshop members does it take to change a well-crafted light bulb?: Three – One to screw it in (the student), one to hold the ladder (the peer), and one to block the light (the teacher).

I block the light too. But I try to use that as a point of rhythmic oscillation, as I move in and out of the rays.

The Writing Experiments seminar focuses on transformation, metamorphosis, substitution, and deformation. It has a typical order (you can see a recent example of the

syllabus here < writing.upenn.edu/bernstein/syllabi/111.html>, starting with a reading of Raymond Queneau's brilliant variations of the "same" story in *Exercises in Style*:

1. Substitution
2. Homolinguistic translation
3. Recombination
4. Homophonic & dialect translation
5. Ekphrasis
6. Chance operation & the aleatoric
7. Without rules, (n)ot!, or is free writing free?
8. Short lines / short poems (attention)
9. Memory
10. Novel forms
11. The art of constraint
12. Flarf & conceptual Poetry: web-generated poems, found poems, appropriation
13. Digital & visual poetry
14. Performance
15. Class anthology / chapbooks /web site

The syllabus itself is subject to deformative performance; as a final assignment, Kimberly Eisler (a Penn freshman at the time) did a set of substitutions for the experiments, making something of a bestiary of possible modernist forms. Here's my edited version:

§ Homolinguistic transduction: Take a pretense (someone else's or your own) and traverse/rewrite/rate it by substituting warp for word, phase for phrase, load for line, or "free" troupe as repose to each phantom or sentence. Or: traditionalize the poem into another, or severely other, illegitimate style.

§ Recombination (1): Write a piece and crack it somewhere in the middle, then recharge with the "best" part following the enjoyable part.

§ Reposition (2) – Doubling: Starting with ominous sentence, write a series of penitentiaries each doubling the number of sexes in the punitive paragraph and including all the words used previously.

§ Homophonic translation: Take a poem to a foreign country that you can pronounce but not necessarily understand and never make it back. Take the sound of their lips before the clouds.

§ Use the wet dream engine.

§ Acrostic charades: Pick a book at random and use the title to feather your pinkie nails and scratch off your wings. For each letter, create a pore and cover every faucet in your multiverse.

§ Poem is made according to the order in which it swells like icicles. Solo: pick a series of ferns or vines from your closet to put in the vat.

§ Dream work: Use the moon to sweep every fur coat under the couch for 30 days. Double the length of each diamond. Borrow a friend and apply these techniques to him or her.

§ Write a poem just when you are on the verge of being forced into the back of a police car.

§Read the Bible with a stranger's chapped lips.
§Bring your brain storm into a bomb shelter.
§Fertilize your pipe dreams.
§Write a poem in which all the events never happen.
§Write a poem made up entirely of hydrogen.
§Let the morning come and tell each of your addled minds a lie.
§Do something five times, then pray.
§Create a blueprint of the way thoughts speak like tiger lilies at the center of gravity.
§Bite your tongue until it bleeds.
§Write a poem in the form of the future.

& the moral of that is: the syllabus is an imaginary map to a constantly transmogrifying place: the process begins with the readings and assignments but ultimately engulfs every aspect of the class and perhaps the psychic spaces beyond. The syllabus (like the pronouncement of the teacher) is subject to its own mandates to question and re-order. & the moral of that is: students in an “experiments” class are as likely to play follow the teacher as students in a traditional forms class. & the moral of that is: leave no turn unstoned.

II. Reading

Modernist poetry projects futures, even if that means concatenating the present as if it were a future. The modernist poem is always in the future because that's where you catch it, just beyond the poem, in Wallace Stevens's “what's after” (“Thirteen Way of Looking at a Blackbird”). And once you catch it, it dissolves into air; the butterfly net is empty. In other words, the more I try to pin the poem down, the more it eludes me and elates me. I come to the poems I know best as an enigma comes to a weigh station. I'm the enigma, the poem's my grounding.

In the 1970s, many of us, batty as hornets in a bee's nest, spoke of reader's response, the reader not the poem makes the meaning. This was true in a deliciously magical sense of “makes,” as in my favorite Lenny Bruce joke, where the kid comes into the candy store, where the genie is behind the counter while the owner's out: “Make me a malted.” “YOU'RE A MALTED!” But as readers, and teachers, we all know that every reading is not equally good; that for all the range of readings some can be entirely off-base, while others, off-beat, offer new horizons for interacting with the poem. In the end, the poem makes malteds of us all.

But even so, there is no one meaning to a poem and the poems I know best, like Stevens's “The Plain Sense of Things” have no plain sense. It's less the heresy of paraphrase than the paraphrase of heresy.

I remain mystified by the culture of testing in modernist and contemporary poetry classes. I couldn't pass a multiple choice test of one of my own poems. A friend once sent me a passages-identification quiz and I couldn't quite remember if the passage in question, which the written record will show that I wrote, was by David Antin, Moses Maimonides, Madonna, or me. Confusion can be more productive than adjudication. If we ask the mind to wonder in reading the poems, let's accept some collateral drift too.

“The student is always right.” No that’s not quite an adoption of the corporate ethos for the classroom, where we don’t teach but offer client services. I mean if a student says something, within the context of the classroom, she can’t be wrong about her perception, though it may not correlate with the poem at hand. So the question is: what about this poem evoked this apparently unsupported response? And how does *that* relate to what is going on in the poem. A misperception can be just as generative for engaging a poem as a supposedly correct perception, especially one grounded in schooling, in rational analysis. The first thing to learn (you can’t quite teach it) about modernist and contemporary poetry is that you have to get the hang of it, trust your intuitions before your analytic faculties come into (and try to keep it) play.

At the University of Pennsylvania, I teach two basic undergraduate 20th century poetry classes: one focused on U.S. poetry <writing.upenn.edu/bernstein/syllabi/88.html> and one focused on poetry outside the U.S.

<writing.upenn.edu/bernstein/syllabi/62.html>. I’ve become increasingly agitated about the Anglomania of our literature classes. I see no problem with actively reading poetry in other languages, working through our own translations in class, or reading multiple translations, together with the originals, where possible. Listening to the sounds and rhythms of the poem, even in the absence of knowing the language, can be exhilarating.

The web syllabus is a key part of the course as I have moved away from photocopied course packs and anthologies and toward greater reliance on web materials, many of which I have compiled for this purpose. I do use print anthologies, but I see these more as background information and further readings than at the center of the class. Wherever possible, I make available sound files of the poets reading their work (together with texts of the poems), something that has been a central focus for Al Filreis and me in starting PennSound <writing.upenn.edu/pennsound>, our huge sound recording archive. (And we are working on developing select recordings of non-English language poetry.) The Electronic Poetry Center <epc.buffalo.edu>, which I edit with Loss Pequeño Glazier and Jack Krick, provides additional digital resources for many of the poets in the syllabi. And fundamental to the project is to make as much of this material as possible available not just to the students registered in the class, but to anyone who accesses our web pages (all free both of charge and advertising).

I developed the Poem Profiler (discussed in “Creative Wreading & Aesthetic Judgment”) to expand the range of possible responses to the poems, so I use that to generate the first order response.

Second, I ask that each week students do “creative wreading” experiments on the poem – a set of deformations, transformations, and imitations that involve doing things with the poems rather than analyzing them <writing.upenn.edu/bernstein/wreading-experiments.html>. These exercises are designed to provide interactive engagement with the assigned reading. I also ask that for each experiment, the student provide a short commentary on the process, the results, the relation to the original, and an assessment of the value of the experiment. The point of these “wreadings” is not to create “original” poems of value, though that may well happen. Rather, these exercises are designed to create a greater engagement with the assigned reading and a greater understanding of the structures of, and possibilities for, poetic composition. Indeed, before you can discourse about a poem you need to think *with* it, get it inside your ears; for that, typing it, or hand writing it, or reciting it over and again, or putting the poet’s reading on our I-pod playlist,

might be a better first encounter with a poem than a thematically unified composition explaining it. The poem cries out: *I don't want to be understood just listened to!* For a last class, there is nothing better than having students recite memorized poems from the syllabus. Imitation and memorization are as old-fashioned, and future-directed, as poetry itself.

Third, I ask students to keep an intensive journal of their responses to the readings. I emphasize that these journals are to be, as far as possible, integrated with the flow of everyday life. Often students include the comments of their roommates or the responses of their friends. At Penn, reading a poem out loud or playing a sound file of a poem is bound to seem odd and provoke quizzical responses; these too become part of the journal. I ask the students to consider a specific set of questions and instructions:

What do you think of the poem? Give as much detail as you can as to why you feel the way you do. What does the poem sound like, what does it remind you of? Quote specific lines or phrases that seem relevant. Being specific is the hardest part of this assignment and I almost always request descriptions of the form and style of the different poems: which can be as simple as a description of the visual shape of the poem, its length, the type of lines (long, short, metrical, enjambed), the sort of style or rhetoric or vocabulary (unusual, common, pastoral, urban, urbane, fast-paced, slow-moving, pictorial, bombastic, introspective, descriptive, narrative, fragmentary, etc.).

The point is not for you to analyze or explain the poem but rather to try to react to it. Cataloging the features of the poem won't explain it but it may enable you to enter into the poem more fully.

Of the poems read for this week, which is your favorite? Why? Which is the best. Why? Are favorite and best the same? Rank the poems in your order of preference.

Of the poems read for this week, which did you like least? Why?

Of the poems read for this week, which is the worst. Why? What are your criteria for deciding the quality of poem. Can poems that you don't like or understand still be good poems?

If you have heard the audio performance, describe the performance and how it extends or contradicts the written version of the poem.

Issues of quality are foregrounded while remaining provisional. The point is not to compare my judgment, or literary history's, with those of students perennially new not only to the difficulties of poetry but also to the pleasures attendant to these difficulties.

The responses to the poems might be mixed with a list of things to do (as in Ted Berrigan's "Things To Do in New York"), with dream entries, with comments on other classes, or with more typical diary entries.

So, what then of the class meetings? Student discussion is central but, with the on-line forum, I pick up themes, concerns, interpretations and take off from there. I try less to lecture and more to be a respondent to the stated (and unstated) responses of the students, as expressed in their journals, wreading experiments, and poem profiles. My motto as a teacher comes from Dominique Fourcade's "tout arrive," which he, in turn, found on Manet's stationery. The class time is a blank page on which a composition takes place: *everything happens* (which Fourcade take from Manet's insignia "tout arrive").

Like an upside-down Boy Scout, Fourcade coins my pedagogic method in a phrase: "Be ready but not prepared" (*Everything Happens*, tr. Stacy Doris; Sausalito, CA: Post Apollo Press, 2000). This stands for nothing less than the multitrack improvisation of possibility. "Let, and not force to happen" (Fourcade again) is not the idea but a method played out in each class. "The light is in the dark."

A few weeks into the class, after a spirited discussion of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*, one of the students half asked, half interjected – "So you're saying this is art?!"

Or, better (as Carolee Schneemann put it in an email): "a perfection of the unexpected."

Teaching Modernist Poetry, ed. Peter Middleton and Nicky Marsh (London and New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2010)

