

SIX

Teaching "Experimental Critical Writing"

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Course Rationale

The syllabus for the graduate seminar says:

As the ambitions of literary criticism become more expansive and searching under the influence of deconstruction, feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, popular culture, and liberatory theoretical movements around race, colonialism, and sexuality, there is increased room for experimentation and reflectiveness in the modalities of critical writing, as well. This course, itself experimental, will offer readings and a workshop to help graduate students explore and expand the shifting grounds of possibility for their own preprofessional and professional writing. Boundaries between genres, between "critical" and "creative" writing, between private and public address, between argumentation and performance, between individual and collaborative production, and between literary and nonliterary texts will be subject to exploration. The ultimate goal of the class is to prepare students to produce professionally publishable writing that will change the current profile of what is publishable in our profession.

I've taught Experimental Critical Writing at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Both work consistently well, and many of the assignments are appropriate for both levels. With undergraduates, the course works as an alternative to more generically based creative writing classes. For graduate students, its main function is to trouble and interrupt the process of professionalization: to make sure that students at the anxious, rather numbing preprofessional level will not lose touch with their own writerly energies.

The point of having frequent, short, tightly framed assignments is to

overcome students' (especially graduate students') inhibitions about experimentation. With only a couple of exceptions, the assignments are organized around very specific formal choices and/or constraints, and students choose their own subject matter.

As in any workshop, students need explicit advice about how to give and solicit useful responses. I always ask them not to jump quickly to "I like . . ." or "I don't like . . .," but to linger as long as they can at the stage of "What is the ambition of this piece?" (Other ways to put this include, "What does the form of this piece know?"—with the implicit addition, ". . . that the reader or even writer may not already know?") Ritually, there's a silence after someone reads a piece aloud, which I will eventually punctuate by asking, "So, what's this piece up to?" or sometimes—but never as a rhetorical question—"How is this piece a response to the assignment?"

How the Course Is Conducted

The class meets weekly for two and a half hours. Because it is run as a workshop, classes must be small (fifteen students or, preferably, fewer). For most of the semester, there are weekly assignments involving three to five pages of writing; collaborative assignments and one or two longer assignments take two weeks apiece.

All students duplicate and circulate their writing each week. We try to discuss as many pieces as we can; pieces that aren't read aloud and discussed in class are read at home, and the other workshop members and I hand back brief written responses to those pieces.

Grading is on the basis of a portfolio handed in at the end of the semester (revisions of earlier pieces are welcome, but not required), with a substantial component for workshop participation.

I try to include some time each week for a brief discussion of the assigned reading, but the clear emphasis is on the students' writing. I do offer a detailed explanation, at the end of each class, of the rationale for the next assignment and some possibilities it may offer.

Reading and Performance Elements

The class assignments are often coordinated with readings and performances planned for the semester. (For example, the assignments collected

here reflect a reading series that brought Wayne Koestenbaum and Marilyn Hacker to Duke during one semester.) Last time I taught these classes, I also brought in a performance artist, Eric Dishman, who not only performed, but also ran a two-and-a-half-hour "Performance 101" class/practicum for each of the seminars. This worked so well (especially with the undergraduates) that I plan to do it early in the semester whenever I teach these courses in the future. It not only dramatized many issues of space and address more graphically and memorably than any amount of jawboning could have, but it made vivid to us that verbal meaning isn't the only or necessarily the most powerful form of meaning—even where words are involved.

Sample Assignments

• Performative Utterances

This is always the first assignment on the syllabus: students need to be reminded that their words do something besides being evaluated. The class discussion of this assignment assumes that some of the "performative utterances" will be closer to Austin's model of the explicit performative than others, and uses that fact not to judge students' work, but to begin to map some of the different dimensions of performativity.

In *How to Do Things with Words*, J. L. Austin suggested that, at least in principle, it might be possible to distinguish between utterances that merely *said* something (constative utterances) and those that *did* something (performative utterances). The defining instances of performative utterances are those whose utterance actually does the thing *described in them*. "I thee wed." "I will my belongings to my daughter Mabel." "I welcome you." In reporting on what had happened in the scenes suggested by these sentences, you probably wouldn't say, "she said she married him," "she wrote that she willed her belongings to Mabel," or "she said she welcomed them." Rather, the more accurate report would be simply "she married him," "she willed her belongings to Mabel," "she welcomed them."

A lot of different projects in philosophy, linguistics, and critical theory since Austin have concentrated on the notion of the performative—often questioning whether it is really possible, even in theory, to divide utter-

ances between the performative and the constative, and calling attention to different senses in which all utterances *do* something *and* at the same time say something.

Your assignment for this week, however, is simpler:

1. Look for more examples of kinds of utterance that clearly belong at the performative pole of Austin's distinction. Marrying, bequeathing, welcoming—what are some other acts that you can perform simply by saying that you perform them? Please work on a list of these; include equivocal cases, and note what you think makes them equivocal.

2. Think about what are the social and discursive preconditions for these various performative acts. (For instance, in some societies you can divorce someone simply by saying, "I divorce you," while in others you can't. What's the difference? If I say, "I excommunicate you," you're still not excommunicated, unless you happen to belong to the Church of Sedgwick; but if the pope says it, and you're a Catholic, then it's a different class of utterance.) Some performatives require one or more witnesses; many imply the presence of witnesses. See what generalizations you can make as you think about issues of address, community, and efficacy in performative utterances.

3. *Writing.* From your list, choose a kind of performative that you actually want to and can perform; and perform it. (I anticipate that these will be from one sentence to one page long.)

Note that with this utterance, you should be *actually performing* the specified act. For example, if your performative utterance is "I invite you to a party at my house tonight at eight," then there'd better be a party when we get there!

If you want to explain more about what you have performed, what was interesting or surprising or revealing about the performance, what preconditions it exposed, what relations it established, what effects you expect it to have, and so forth, feel free to add something about that in an appendix.

• Person

This can work with a lot of different readings—if I'm going to use Barthes's A Lover's Discourse for another assignment, for instance, I'll ask them to look through it with reference to this assignment as well.

Write a two- to three-page piece in which the assignment of grammatical person changes at least once. (E.g., an "I" turns into a "you" or a "he" or "she" or a "they," and/or vice versa.) Reflect on the differences this change makes: what different things can/cannot be said using a different person? What words or kinds of utterance mean differently? What other effects (and, indeed, causes) can you associate with the change of grammatical person? Can you make connections between this assignment and the one on performative utterances?

Axiom for the week: "I is a heuristic."

• Keywords

Several pages of handouts from: Raymond Williams, *Keywords*; Jan Zita Grover, "AIDS Keywords," in Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*; Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*; Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*; Gustave Flaubert, *Dictionary of Received Ideas*.

Write a two- to three-page "Keywords" list for some topic that matters to you.

Like the Jan Zita Grover handout, and the Raymond Williams book on which it is in turn modeled, use various aspects of the definition form as a way of opening up analytical and polemical space. (Think: how can a definition be a performative utterance?)

Specifically, explore the ways the definition form makes use of some of the following elements:

Historical narrative (Where does the term come from? How has it been used? What has changed in its usage, and why?)

Ethnographic description (Who uses the term? To whom is it meant to be intelligible or unintelligible? What audiences or communities are created or shaped or assumed or interpellated by its usage, and why?)

Differentiation (What terms are similar to this one, and how is it different? What are the analytical or other bases of such discriminations?)

Prescription (Why/how/by whom should it/should it not be used?)

You may want to make use of the OED (Oxford English Dictionary) in doing this assignment. Then again, you may not.

• Truth Effects: "In Short, We Have Been Telling Ourselves Some Lies."

This is an assignment I use only with graduate classes.

Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*.

Jan Brown, "Sex, Lies, and Penetration," in Joan Nestle, ed., *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*.

Note that both essays—each in its own discursive context—are structured around the rhetoric, "In short, we have been telling ourselves some lies." Think about this rhetoric and how it works. Is it powerful for you? Does it generate a strong truth-effect? How? What positions and relations does it create? How does it interpellate readers? Writers? What kinds of authority does it assume or create? What energies does it tap into? How does it seem to be working in the context of ongoing political projects (of identity politics? of sexual politics specifically?)? What are other rhetorics that work similarly to this one? Are there forms of rhetoric that work completely differently? What is its relation to readers who do not identify with the "we"?

Your assignment: Write a two- to three-page essay in which you say, "In short, we have been telling ourselves some lies." (This will obviously require you to give some thought, first of all, to a "we" with which you identify powerfully enough to need to make such assertions.)

The next four assignments all come under a rubric of "pluralizing voices."

• Quotation

Read the first two-thirds or so of Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde*. Pay attention to a lot of things about it—it's a wonderful model of experimental critical writing in many different ways. Pay special attention, though, to the different ways he uses quotations. He doesn't seem to see them simply as "evidence" for a thesis put forth in his own prose—at some points, his book almost reminds me of the German critic Walter Benjamin's fantasy that the perfect book would consist *exclusively* of quotations.

Now write something of one to three pages that finds SOME way of foregrounding the issue of quotation: a fabric of quotations, a *catalogue*

raisonné of quotations, an essay that “incorporates” quotation(s) in some especially revealing or productive or offbeat way. (Do remember that the rest of the class is not necessarily in a position to check the accuracy of your quotations.) Use the exercise as an excuse for generating and exploring—at least in your own mind—a range of metaphors for the process of quotation and for the relations reflected or produced by quotation.

- The Obituary Imperative

Simon Watney, *Policing Desire*.

Sandra Butler and Barbara Rosenblum, *Cancer in Two Voices*.

Write a three- to five-page piece that pays some attention to, or makes some use of, the issues of representation and address that attach to the processes of loss and mourning.

Think about why/how the obituary impulse in each piece is attached to a form that pluralizes voices. Think also about how such obituary issues and impulses may already be part of such everyday practices as historical or textual scholarship; sexuality and genderedness; activism; urban, domestic, and landscape space; advertising and the media, etc. What do such usages do, and what could they?

- Prose/Poetry Version 1

Read as much as you can (at least half) of Cherrie Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*.

Among the many exciting things to remark in it, be responsive to the ways Moraga moves back and forth between poetry and prose writing. What use does she make of each form? (Don’t forget to think about the relation of the poetry/prose shifts to the Spanish/English shifts.) Does she have more than one way of using each form? What features of each form are enabling to her, and how? What does the unexpected *conjunction* of the forms allow her to do that she might not have been able to do using just one or the other? What are the effects on you, as a reader, of moving back and forth between the forms? Does the difference or doubling of forms change the book’s reader-relations: does it allow Moraga to appeal to, or create, a different community of readers with different expectations, different relations to her and/or to each other? If so, what and how? How

would you relate that to the issues of plural and intersecting identities that form so much of the subject of the book?

Assignment: Write one to three pages of your own that mix poetry and prose in a way that both illuminates what you want to talk about and lets you explore the difference of the possibilities of two different forms—and the highly charged moments of switching back and forth.

For the purpose of this assignment, our working definition of “poetry” will be a very simple one: *Poetry is writing in which the author makes a deliberate decision about where the lines will end*. Poetry is not necessarily more “personal,” more emotional, more metaphoric, more rhythmically regular, more patterned in sound, denser, and so forth than prose—prose can have all those attributes, and poetry need not necessarily have any of them. What poetry has that prose does not have is line breaks. Think about the differences that this one differential can make in the processes of writing and reading. For instance: poetry breaks up a page, visually, in a way prose does not. Another, even more important difference: in poetry, the unit of the line will be in *some* relation to the normal English unit of the sentence; but it is up to you to decide *what* relation. You can make a line essentially equivalent to a sentence. You can make a line equivalent to a grammatical unit that makes sense as part of a sentence (e.g., the subject of a sentence in one line, the predicate in the next line). You can have line breaks that cut up the sentence in completely unexpected or even apparently random ways. You can have two sentences in one line. You can have lines without having sentences at all—or you can use the line structure to “deconstruct” what a sentence is, in some ways. And you can move from one of these strategies to another. Various ways of using rhyme, or regular or irregular rhythms, will have a big impact on how readers experience the unit of the line, as well, if you want to experiment with these factors—but you may well choose not to at this point.

- Prose/Poetry Version 2

I begin this assignment by handing out the following text (or at least, a topically relevant version of it, depending on what readings/lectures I want to alert students to) to the part of the class that’s sitting on the left half of the room:

Read, if you haven’t, Cherrie Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years*, and James Merrill’s “Prose of Departure.” Pay some attention to what differentiates

the prose from the verse in these (and similar) contexts: can it be only the ragged or straight right margin? Is it a way of hearing the syllables? Is the address different, the expectation of just who might be listening, and how? What happens to the temporality? What happens to the space of utterance? What's it like to move from one to the other? What are some uses to make of the difference? "In short"—the usual two to three pages, please, incorporating both kinds of right margin.

Oh, and please mark your calendars and tell everyone else about Koestenbaum's reading from *Rhapsodies of a Repeat Offender*, etc., on the seventeenth, at eight. I'm sure you know him as one of the leading critics and most fabulous gay male poets around, for chutzpah and sheer splendor (plus, he's a charmer). BE THERE or be straight.

Students on the right half of the room, meanwhile, are receiving the following text:

Read, if you haven't, Cherrie Moraga's *Loving in the War Years*, and James Merrill's "Prose of Departure."
Pay some attention to what differentiates the prose from the verse in these (and similar) contexts: can it be only the ragged or straight right margin? Is it a way of hearing the syllables? Is the address different, the expectation of just who might be listening, and how? What happens to the temporality? What happens to the space of utterance? What's it like to move from one to the other? What are some uses to make of the difference? "In short"—the usual two to three pages, please, incorporating both kinds of right margin.

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I begin the discussion of poetry/prose by having someone on the left (prose) side read the assignment, then someone on the right (verse) side—it's eventually clear

that the assignments differ; then there's discussion of differences between how verse and prose are processed by readers—differences that make it almost impossible to recognize verse, however jogtrot, when it's written as prose. This turns into a discussion of how meter works, and I ask students to organize their writing this time around issues of rhythm, syllabics, and meter. (In the undergraduate class, I often precede this assignment with one that asks students who have never done so to write something in a deliberately singsong meter, invoking children's verse; more experienced students write something in blank verse.)

* Biographies of Voices

Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*.

Use this book as a springboard for thinking about voice—physical voice as well as written voice. Breath, vibration, voice production, embodied and disembodied voices, falsetto and basso; the gaps between voice registers; voices inward and outward; vocal mimicry, voice socialization, vocal inhibition, stuttering, asthma, slobbering, squeaking; a voice changing; wings of song; bad singing; voice in the dark; "He do the police in different voices." Write two to three pages on a topic somewhere in the vicinity of "Where does a voice come from?"

* Situated Biography (A Two-Week Exercise)

For all its brevity, this is actually a wonderful assignment.

Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde*.

Using Bartlett as an example, write a three- to five-page biographical study that makes some interesting use of the fact that it is being written *by* somebody, as well as *about* somebody.

* Modularity

Marilyn Hacker, *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons*.

James Merrill, "Prose of Departure," from *The Inner Room*.

In the readings, focus on the effects involved when more or less discrete units of the same form (sonnet, haiku) keep happening again and again.

(Clearly, there is a range, between and indeed within the two texts, in how detachable the poem-units are from the overall structure.)

Now write something that plays with the concept of modularity—of more-or-less detachable and/or formally interchangeable units. (This may, but does not have to, involve poetry or verse forms.)

- Collaborative Archaeology (A Two-Week Assignment)

This works well for undergraduates; graduate students can get a more sophisticated version of this assignment.

Look at Wayne Koestenbaum's book *The Queen's Throat*, especially chapters 1 and (in particular) 3. Note the variety of approaches to excavating a single topic, opera—and specifically, note the “scrapbook” form, the short sections with frequent new beginnings, and the movements back and forth between personal history and a larger, social history.

With your group, settle on a topic that has some autobiographical resonance for each of you: a children's book or fairy tale, “school lunch,” a person or a television character or genre from your earlier years, animals, the concept of “teacher's pet,” or—you get the idea. Don't choose a topic that will disguise the differences among your experiences, but one that will let you explore such differences. Think about good ways of structuring a short but multivoiced, multiperspective, multihistory *archaeology* of this topic. Like Koestenbaum's, your archaeology should draw from both personal experience and historical record. (Yes, you can use pictures, etc.) No particular page limit, but the various sections will need to be brief, so think about how to make them as vividly evocative as possible—including evocations of different private and public spaces, different personalities, different bodies experienced from the outside and the inside. Then, work individually and collectively on the pieces of this archaeology. The final product can be written and/or delivered aloud in class.

- Performative Utterance Revisited

This builds on our very first assignment in this class: to come up with an effective speech act, a performative utterance by which something may actually be changed. Instead of doing it on an individual basis, however,

this assignment asks you to work with your small group to plan and perform something that will count as a performative utterance on a more public scale. Please think about the following questions:

What do you think needs to change?

What *representational* acts could effect change?

What are the relations of *address* involved in these acts? (I.e., who is speaking, and to whom?)

Who is *interpreting* these acts, and how? How much control, and what kinds of control, do you have over this interpretive process?

What is the relation of these acts to preexisting forms and conventions of utterance?

What is the relation of these acts to preexisting media of public representation and advertising?

Document your public speech act, describe the process of its development, and evaluate it, in some form to be determined by yourselves (individually or collectively). Be prepared to report on it at the final class meeting/potluck dinner.