

Creative Writing (Classes) As a Means of Revealing Unconscious Belief Systems: The Folk Culture So Often Disclosed when one is ‘Writing Viewpoints’

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ABSTRACT: This paper treats of a milestone book that is a already sensational text in many countries. It is concerned with the process of conducting /appraising ‘writing classes’, these being a powerful /revelatory experience for all class members and for the instructor, for (s)he may well not have the training in psychology that may be appropriate in this area. The thrust of the argument is towards the subtlety required in the guidance of such ‘thinking /speaking /writing’—something linked to the classic text of C.E.M. Joad, as well as to the most sensitive learning theory.

In the English autumn of 2011, the morally courageous, frank and so quietly influential and rightly respected British publishers, Multilingual Matters, had issued their sixth volume in the exciting series, ‘New Writing Viewpoints’, it being entitled ‘Negotiating the Personal in Creative Writing’.¹ As the world wide web had made quite clear within a few days from release of the text, this work—or already by then, a clearly triggered body of discussion on the teaching of writing and on a range of its fairly recent and related seminars—had soon created almost as much interest as a loaded news story involving scandal, crime, race, or the shockingly prurient. For—and like so many texts from this always direct and searingly honest publisher—the whole comprises a mass of (heard/ reported/ imagined) dialogue, reflection, and somewhat free suggestion.

This was /is very much as might well occur in the thoughts—if not in the actual immediate utterances—of the members of an articulate, moderately cautious, and yet frankly spoken group of persons who spend time in each other’s company for the purpose of sharing ideas/ learning/ exploring their own responses both intellectual and emotional. For the

¹ The book which is the focus of this essay of response is Carl Vandermeulen, *Negotiating the Personal in Creative Writing* (Bristol; Buffalo; Toronto: Multilingual Matters). Pp, xx, 229. ISBN-13: 987-1-84769-438-6 (hbk); and /or ISBN-13: 978-1-84769-437-9 (pbk).

members of the model/ this representative group were honestly learning about their own (communicated) integrity in writing by more reflective openness, and so then considering [their own] communication processes and their consequences, these now more sharply focussed through their own more public creative writing endeavours.

Interestingly, these people were /seemed to be relatively at ease in a seminar-type situation, but the observer-leader (and it is he who is now reporting to us), Carl Vandermeulen, with a considerable career in this area—could discern many nuances and subjectivities of which their projectors would have been little aware. Their vulnerability—like their frankness—came about from the degree of self-exposure involved when they were in a situation where the creative, the assessed, and the likelihood of envy from others present and participative, were all in sharp focus. The attempts to be totally objective were not always successful, and so we have a fascinating view of the emotions, thoughts, and phobias of the group, all produced in far more revealing detail than the members of the groups /like classes of [writing] students anywhere could possibly have imagined.

Such aware people constitute the many reported-on groups in this book, and, in the main, they were officially setting about the task of honing both their literary manner and social perceptivity, and at the same time discovering /uncovering both their greater awareness of the thoughts of others, and their phobias, cultural differences, and the sorts of ‘baggage’ which is almost impossible to rid one’s self of in our post-millennial societies. For many of these personal and unguarded voices projected /(will) project loneliness, insecurity, and a but dubious understanding of the behaviour of a range of adults in an assembled group. In fact, the ‘writing’ situation seemed to be able to actualise so much of the latent emotion probably present for much of their daily lives in the class members.

In other words, this ‘writing’ book may be read, we believe, to be seen as one that constitutes an admirable description of /a guide to many interactive situations, thoughts, and the related impressions. So often are these unwittingly given in complex statements when the speaker /communicator has but little perception of the various characteristics of her /his verbal offerings, so often remarkably revealing and not related purely to the immediate or more regular context. The whole is, as Joad would have said, [see below], a text illustrating excellently the problems of matter, manner, and so of the [often unintended but] quite certainly conveyed meaning.

Ironically, all the members of the many classes and groups reflected on /investigated by the author had wished learn, in much subtle illustration, what is really going on when they offer materials, and how they may or not be heard and understood.

For creative writing, like one's relations with the opposite (or desired) sex, would seem to need much reassurance, constructive responses, and an understood approval of that which is sure, honest, engaging, wise, or otherwise successful, and so as affirming a confident and meaningful outreach to other people.

Failures and Limitations

In the following paragraphs the writer of the book proposed to show something of the many failures of and limitations to the intelligent member of a class or group and to the creative individual's intentions in social situations, by virtue of unrealised cautionary self-protection, hyper-sensitivity, and from the reluctance to consider closely, let alone focus on the reception of one's own views, polished words, excessive self-concerns, and so vanity . . . as well as the inevitable intrusions of self-pity. The way of making so much of the frank reporter's thought acceptable is to continually stress the collaborative aspects of the whole, since writers, both actual and potential, wish to succeed in group, and in magazine and other publication settings. For they would wish to be esteemed for their efforts to transmit, and to treat with appropriate artistry the matters which they are most concerned to display or share, and to have their work admired by those encountering them.

The text's 'Introduction' suggests very gently that these are 'mysterious interpersonal dynamics' (p. vii), and that they are peculiarly related to the attempted literary and other contexts or genres, but it is, surely, possible to stand back from this and to apply the conclusions much more widely to the situations where the common factor is that of the desire to present 'fine' or persuasive writing. This point is put forward lucidly in a section concerned with the mystery of one's personal place—and yet the need to be as clear as possible for one's readers or audience . . . this often experienced by writing about satisfying experiences that will assist growth in the same audience. For this there must be a helpful interpersonal relationship with the 'writer-teacher', one that comes with the emotions in the classroom, but where also there should be much less intrusion of the personality of the teacher, and more hearer /pupil understanding of the link between one's personality and one's writing—actual and potential. Blame and censure are enemies, or elephants who lurk in the corners of the room, as does self-deprecation from those who are not comfortable with the mindset of the majority.

And so to a Recollection of C.E.M. Joad ?

The present responders had decided to first read around in the text, not least because of its certain similarities to the remembered style of C.E.M. Joad, the English philosopher and teacher of adults outside the normal

higher education system² in his milestone seminar-type publications concerned with thinking, speaking, and writing. These were so very appealing to similar and reflective adult groups in southern England, and worldwide, in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Particularly obvious here would be the (usually undated and so very widely distributed) editions of Joad's *How to Write, Think and Speak Correctly*, a work excellently effective in indicating to both reader and talker how we are each able, in however humble a fashion: to bring clarification to the spoken word; to recognise our failings in logic when meaning seems to falter; and so to then become so much better at saying what one really means—in short, discerning the intention behind or within all dialogues, albeit that many speakers and writers so often draw back and so do not achieve the desired communication with their fellows.

In actuality, Joad's reflective philosopher and father-like style was intended to make a clearer, fuller and more likely understanding the possible consequence of most class, seminar, or group dialogues. We are not concerned with his harder and philosophy-like texts, but it is helpful to recall the titles of his other works intended to create both confidence and a measure of understanding, calm, and mellow perspective as opposed to a blind fear—as in his much reprinted *Guide to Philosophy*, or his *How to Think About Economics*. For convenience, there is now added a cluster of these, ordered by the dates of the earliest impactful editions of his such focussed works:

The Present and Future of Religion (1930)

Guide to Modern Thought (1933)

Return to Philosophy: being a defence of reason: an affirmation of values, and a plea for philosophy (1935)

Guide to the Philosophy of Morals and Politics (1938)

Guide to Modern Wickedness (1939)

Journey Thorough the War Mind (1940)

God and Evil (1942); and

Decadence: A Philosophical Inquiry (1948).]

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² He was long associated—during the middle decades of the 20th century—with London's Birkbeck College, with its morally and politically serious blue collar students, and with the political left, where desperate honesty and directness were deemed to be essential to almost all personal relations, written communications, public speaking and social intercourse. The parallels with an older socialism in Australia are obvious.

From here on, it is proposed to treat in sequence the larger themes in Vandermeulen's quietly reflective and yet equally challenging text itself.

'Considering Where We're Coming From', the first chapter, is a fine mode of approach, not least since it is concerned with consideration of the influences that have shaped us, and the stated and tacit goals that mould our teaching, while the second chapter questions assumptions about the size of a class, the excessive use of critiques, and 'the tradition of the silent writer'. The matter of the class members writing their talk to each other is equally fascinating, as is the matter of reflecting hard on what one has written or proffered. For much of this, small groups are to be preferred to the workshop, and emphasis is rightly given to processes that should support the tyro writer as much as possible. The fifth chapter suggests that the teacher or leader should accompany the student along the paths of self-awareness, and so to know how and when to get to the one-on-one situation with the individual member of the seminar/class. Clearly this demands both intuition and a measure of gentle control of the currents in the group's talking together.

The sixth chapter is a fine set of thoughts on the master and pupil situation, and it is valid for so many situations in adult learning. And the next looks at the sometimes difficult aspects to personal relations, where the emotional may well become complex in the pupil. The eighth chapter touches on the tricky matter of the course being expected to be 'graded', and so the desperate pressures working on the student to achieve approval and reward, rather than honest and sensitive reflections on what has been proffered in frank fashion.

Chapter 9 is rather engaging, since it is concerned with the habit of writing, this being the aspect of one's personal journal which records and tells; documents what is intended to remind the writer (much) and so to some perspectives on this later; the self-posed questions that may well tease for decades, and never be resolved; and so to some further perspectives on this. Clearly much of this will remind the reader of adult learning theory, but the narcissistic can only accept all of this with some emotion, quite apart from the factors of sexual nuance that may well creep into the situations. Perhaps the most satisfying aspects of the earlier chapters are the stresses on: courtesy; reflection; remaining calm; not competing and vying for attention; on the need for space, quiet, return to one's notes; and the essential calm without which much of this sharing must be much vitiated.

At this level, we are dealing with maturity, integrity, further reflection; and the need to realise that—unless these qualities are practised throughout one's life—the calm, the intuitive, and the wisely reflective are not likely to be recorded on one's page. At this point, the

reviewers are intrigued by the references to the American professor of literature and language, Stanley Wiersma,³ someone once a Fulbright Professor visiting New South Wales, and certainly possessed of so many of the nicenesses that are essential in the bardic, fatherly or guardian type person to whom we would all go for guidance and sympathy in these strangely sensitive situations.

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At the beginning we had intimated that the work was one that had much to say about post-modern/urban/post-colonial man and woman, even as it treads of their likely sensibilities and sensitivities. Clearly such courses are essential for all apprentices and aspirers to fully participatory and (publically) identified roles in society, and they must—as does this book—focus on courtesies, humilities, quietness, retrospectives, indeed all the once exhorted ingredients for the making oneself ready for deeper and more prayer.

It will be very obvious that we have chosen to respond to this text in an intensely personal fashion, but that in itself is the most sincere tribute that can be paid to this melange of: observations, experiences, and very close moral authority reflections in a style like that of the Roman Seneca's 'Moral Letters'; exercises in assisting the reader to recognise him-/her-self; realisations that certain persons will never be on each other's 'wave length'; and so to the basic need to understand all the limitations as well as the charming aspects of 'the Romantic Self'. Clearly, too, the mark reward, the desire for 'publication at any price' for one's work are framing circumstances that will often seem to be deterrents to the most sincere, respected, and successful 'makings' of the individual man or woman. Of course, the book is cramful of maxims that will appeal: that 'satisfaction' is personal (p. 17); that a writing community must 'emphasise mutual identification and empathy (*ibid.*); that 'good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher' (*ibid.*); and the sobering appraisal that 'artists —and especially writers — are more anxious, depressed, and manic-depressive than anyone else' (p. 19).

Many other parts of the book are concerned to re-assure the reader who would be a writer that 'Independent nonconformists tend to dwell on the margins of institutions, and to prefer the company of others like themselves' (p. 20), and so to the reflections that those who handle such

³ Professor Wiersma (1925–1986) is an interesting example of the calm, wise and engaging teacher, since he had early researched in Germanic languages, as well as Australian and more recent American literature, and was much liked in Australia, Holland and elsewhere, as well as in his native United States of America. The reviewers had met him towards the end of his life.

students can often have much success, or, and equally likely, ‘relationships that are likely to go terribly wrong’ (p. 20).⁴ Since the text is both a form of autobiography as well as a manual, we are moved by the maxims that end each of the chapters, notably that teachers in this difficult area, as Plato said, will need ‘those strong traits . . . volition, resilience, courage and insight—especially insight’. (p. 23)

At the end of one’s reading and re-reading, it is realised that the real purpose of the book is to give an unflinching account of the book writer’s career as a mentor, a craftsperson in words and someone who is ever concerned to ‘get students to a place where they can keep moving forward on their own’ (p. 119). Another core view is that the mentor must realise that the role is a ‘sacred’ one, since the practice of acknowledging opinion and talent is a vital one, as but few of the able are convinced of their moral worth and potential and creativity. Interestingly, too, it is recorded in a quiet moment that teachers who ‘do not write *should*’ (p. 121), especially so that they ‘experience first hand what their students will experience.’ (p. 121) Another key theme is the need to sit in a watching circle, even as there is deemed a need for the teacher to produce his/her own thought—something often replaced by stories of like situations, especially when the outcome is far other than the earlier self of the teacher had then expected.

Much of the discussion of the nature of the teacher is akin to that treating of the philosopher or wise man in earlier societies, tribal situations, or any group where there are likely to be mother/ father figures. And a good example of this is the notion that one will need to emerge from the style of the admired writer, and so move to a frank and even painful personal treatment of the appealing topic or theme.⁵

Perhaps the best guide to the way ahead for a would-be better and more confident writer is a pondering over the titles of the books and articles listed in this work’s comprehensive bibliography, so many of which encapsulate nuances, aperçus, and witty thoughts that the reader will cherish. Then to find the mentor, but, above all, to believe that the process is there to be grasped, to be studied, and practised. From there on, you are to become an adult learner working at the most fascinating of all your life’s challenges, a better understanding of your self, your potential, and of the ways to be travelled as one attempts more of the ways to its artistic fulfilment.

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⁴ This is an obvious aspect of the current reliance on student evaluation, a chancy business—as is well known in the field of group dynamics, let alone amongst regular players of the game of poker.

⁵ One of the most engaging ones pondered on is the writing that follows the proffered theme, ‘In My Father’s Desk Drawer’ (p. 135, f.).