No Apology: Challenging the "Uselessness" of Creative Writing

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I thought he was pretty good. My expectations weren't really that high because I knew he was a writer. So he didn't do any kind of in-depth academic analysis. He just told stories.

an English professor in response to a lecture by fiction writer N. Scott Momaday

The pursuit of craft tends to decay in the presence of intelligence.

a literary magazine editor in a keynote address at a national conference on fiction writing

Obviously, no one will leave revolutionized. It lasts for a while, then everyone goes home.

Helene Cixous, quoted in Le Monde, about her latest play, "Et soudain, des nuits d'eveil" (my translation)

The first requirement of a work of art in the twentieth century is that it should do nothing.

Jane Tompkins, "The Reader in History"

I start this essay with a few expressions of creative writing's uselessness that I've encountered from theorists, writers, editors, teachers. Recent collections such as Joseph Moxley's Creative Writing in America, Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom's Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing Theory and Pedagogy, and David Starkey's Teaching Writing Creatively push against the construction of creative writing as a gleeful pleasure principle naturally opposed to "serious" and "academic" writing. A full spectrum of critics from feminist theory, cultural studies, post-colonial studies, and queer theory have likewise challenged the New Critical notion that an artful text does nothing; it simply is. Still, the apologetic, dismissive view persists—even in the words of feminist theorist Helene Cixous who, when it comes to discussing her own writing, reinforces the twentieth-century requirement that a text, if it's to be considered truly creative, does nothing at all: "It lasts for a while, then everyone goes home" (Perrier, "Notre spectacle" 18).

At the same time, I find some lively debate among compositionists about the uses of creative writing in our tales of teaching and learning. In Writing
Students: Composition Testimonials and Representations of Students, for example, Marguerite Helmers highlights, and problematizes, our professional uses of creative writing. Because composition's teaching narratives have tended to represent students and teachers as one-dimensional caricatures, she urges the field to turn away from what she calls "soft ethnography." Other compositionists have urged a further blurring of, rather than a retreat from, the unstable line between telling stories and making arguments about teaching. In "Revision Hope: Writing Disruption in Composition Studies," Julie Jung contends that compositionists can rewrite their stories of teaching not through making those tales smoothly readable (thus creating the stock characterizations and troubling epiphanies that Helmers rightly argues against) but through creating textual disruptions that "delay closure and thereby create spaces where theories and relationships can be rethought, renegotiated, and revised" (437). Though their arguments are, in a sense, opposed, I hear Helmers and Jung both arguing that composition scholarship does indeed set scenes, create characters, and narrate conflicts—our rhetorical enterprise entirely dependent on poetic forms and traditions. I also hear both refuting the statement, "The pursuit of craft tends to decay in the presence of intelligence." They persuade me instead that the depth, complexity, and potential insights of our teaching narratives grow as we bring to these tales critical questions and creative discursive practices. Further, they might be telling us that this is what a rhetorical education is all about: learning to critically examine and creatively respond to all the rhetorical strategies (including those of image-making, dream-weaving, and storytelling) that writers (including writers of expository prose) daily rely upon.

Yet despite our professional reliance on the stuff of poetics, compositionists haven't been talking, or not very much, about the work students do in classrooms that focus on writing fiction, poetry, drama, or memoir. And despite our increasingly keen awareness of the uses (and abuses) of stories, we've tended to support the view that classes marked as creative writing exist apart from "functionalist" composition classrooms or even that such classes don't really involve work but pleasure and reward, an extra-curricular treat for a special, talented few. The only article to appear in College English in the 1990s with a focus on creative writing classrooms, for instance, is titled, "An Apologia for Creative Writing." In that article, Ron McFarland counters the charge that American universities, through workshops, majors, and MFA degrees, have destroyed creative writing. This is a timely counter, a needed one, and yet McFarland counters the charge by retreating from any claims for what such majors, degrees, and courses might do: "[W]e do not claim to make people into writers" and "[M]ostly [such a program] will graduate people of ordinary talent and conventional wisdom or vision who enjoy writing and who achieve some satisfaction from the craft" (36). Thus McFarland argues that creative writing does no harm because it does not do much of anything.

Recently, a number of writing teachers have, indirectly, taken exception to McFarland's modesty topos. Contributors to Teaching Writing Creatively, for
example, argue that all writing, despite genre, can be approached as "creative"; their essays demonstrate that creativity needs no apology in composition classrooms. Several writing teachers have taken this argument a crucial step farther. Mary Ann Cain (Revisioning Writers' Talk) and Elisabeth Anne Leonard ("Assignment #9") make an important double move as they not only argue for approaching all writing creatively but also for approaching all writing, regardless of genre, critically and rhetorically. Cain and Leonard demonstrate that there are important claims to be made for the critical uses of creative writing: for how genres such as fiction and poetry can counter conventional wisdom, open up for examination principles of reality, and provide, as Cain argues, "a mode of inquiry into the languages of others" (15). More, their work suggests that a claim can be made for how creative writing, far from existing apart as an extracurricular surplus, can trouble the existing curriculum—providing us with a mode of inquiry into our curricular assumptions and opening up for examination the neat, simple, and thus very attractive stories that we tell about who needs to write and in what kinds of classes.

These are the claims I want to explore further through an introductory fiction workshop taken one summer by students whose majors were not in English but who were going on to professional careers that would daily call on them to construct stories and characterize others. The work of these students, I believe, can help us see not only how in writing instruction the critical and creative need to go hand in hand but also how critical reflection on the makings and uses of stories can be especially crucial for students who are planning careers in education, law, medicine—professions in which the boundary between detail and evidence, plot and prognosis, story and offense is uncertain indeed. At the same time, I also want to grapple with the ways in which these claims I've just sketched for the rhetorical work of creative writing (claims I am certainly not the first to make) have been continually suppressed through that persistent belief in creative writing's uselessness, its utter lack of rhetoricity. I think it's particularly important that compositionists examine these suppressions because this belief in creative writing's uselessness—a belief that protects and reinforces creative writing's rhetorical power—is one we've had a hand in upholding.

"A Fear You Have Never Felt about a Class Before"

Students, Wendy Bishop writes, frequently enter her creative-writing classrooms believing in the "myth of 'free creativity'" (186). They believe that such a class will have no rules, no boundaries, nothing to fetter a wild imagination. Such was not the belief of students who enrolled in English 252, Introduction to Fiction Writing, at a large midwestern university during a three-week summer session. Because of what among the English faculty is regarded as an accident of the curriculum, this university's introductory fiction- and poetry-writing workshops fulfill an intermediate-level composition requirement for students in education, criminal justice, and nursing. Typically, then, sections of English 252 are filled not with eager students who have imagined themselves as writers since
the day they first read Jack Kerouac, but instead with students who are anxious or resigned. If these students believe in that Kerouac-ian myth of free creativity, they also firmly believe it does not apply to them. At most, one student, Mark, says at the start of the summer-session class, “this class might help me to write a good resume—since a good resume needs a lot of fiction.”

On that first day, I ask students—whose names I’ve changed for this essay and whose work I quote with permission—to write a letter to themselves about their expectations for the class. In these letters they describe apprehension, confusion, mild resentment, or a resigned pragmatism. “I needed to fulfill a writing requirement and I needed something in pre-session and this was it,” writes Mark, a senior majoring in music education. “You like things to be clear cut, presented to you in a predictable manner,” Tish, a sophomore majoring in elementary education, writes. “Something as unpredictable as fiction leaves you with a fear you have never felt about a class before.” “I have signed up for English 252 because the university essentially says I have to,” writes Alice, a senior in nursing getting ready to begin a professional program in optometry. “The one thing holding me between past life and future life are these three credits.” These students aren’t alone in perceiving the course as a senseless requirement. For the creative writing faculty, this curricular accident is in need of correction; they send letters to the deans of the criminal justice, nursing, and education colleges explaining why these workshops aren’t suitable for students outside the English major. Graduate teaching assistants, who had longed for the “reward” of a creative writing class, share their dismay in discovering that these students have the same “bad attitude” about writing as students in first-year comp.

My own view of English 252 and the students who take it is different, perhaps because I also approached my first fiction workshop with a “bad attitude,” prodded into the class by my academic advisor. I’m not sure why my advisor urged me at that moment, the end of my junior year, to sign up for a beginning creative writing workshop. Maybe she saw (as I see now) how every essay I wrote in school was a seamless, predictable little package that neatly excised any potential disruption. Maybe she believed that working in a new, unfamiliar genre could change my understanding of the nonfiction genres I was so at home—too at home—within. Maybe she saw that my understanding of expository and argumentative prose needed the “sideshadows” of fiction or poetry.

Here I need to explain what I mean by the word “sideshadows” since this word has much to do with how I approached English 252, with how I understand the uses of creative writing today. Sideshadowing is a term coined by Bakhtinian literary theorist Gary Saul Morson to describe the alternative to the much more familiar narrative device of foreshadowing. While foreshadowing “projects onto the present a shadow from the future” and thus gives the future the appearance of inevitability (i.e., a seamless, predictable little package) (9), sideshadowing asks us to look again at the present moment, its surplus details we haven’t considered, the other contrasting and competing visions of the future that surplus could bring into view. “It seems to me,” Morson writes, “that people
frequently commit themselves to forms of argument, social concepts, or moral
doctrines without realizing the consequences entailed and without making a
choice among a range of possibilities” (5). Sideshadowing is a discursive practice
designed to open up seemingly closed temporalities, to offer a glimpse of that
range of possibilities, the consequences entailed in each. Instead of writing and
reading as if the future is already set, we can consider, “But what if it is not?”
Through sideshadowing, Morson writes, “time itself becomes a succession not
just of points of actuality but also of fields of possibility” (12).

For Morson sideshadowing is a literary device that works against narrative
determinism; it alters a novel’s presentation of what is and what must be. For
me sideshadowing is a counter to narrative determinism in our stories of
schooling. Through sideshadowing, I see my undergraduate advisor actively
countering the usual story told about academic socialization. According to that
story, meaning and identity result from total immersion within a single
discipline; meaning and identity are foreshadowed by a discipline’s preexisting rituals
and conventions that a student struggles to master. Thus a class outside a
student’s chosen discipline, introducing other rituals and conventions, alternative
dead ideas of discourse, must be a distraction, a mistake, or, at best, a moment’s
respite from the serious work at hand.

Over the past ten years numerous compositionists have questioned this
story of academic socialization, including David Bartholomae who—in an
apparent critique of his earlier “He must become like us” story of the writing
classroom—now argues for composition teaching that critiques discursive and
disciplinary norms. “[W]e can imagine,” he writes, “that the goal of writing
instruction might be to teach an act of criticism that would enable a writer to
interrogate his or her own text in relationship to the problems of writing and
the problems of disciplinary knowledge” (17). An act of criticism, I believe, is
what my undergraduate advisor urged me toward when she urged me to sign up
for a class in fiction writing or in poetry—a class in which my usual essay-writing
formulas would not work, a class that would lead me to question just how my
usual formulas were working elsewhere as well. That first fiction workshop
didn’t just introduce me to something challenging and new, a parallel reality, one
foreshadowed future (the path to becoming an academic) replaced by another
(the path to becoming a fiction writer). It turned me back toward what was
familiar, conventional, routine. It challenged my writing across genres and
across curricular divides. And eventually, it challenged my sense that “aca-
demic” and “fiction writer” are separate points of actuality I must choose
between.

Of course my undergraduate and graduate fiction workshops were not some
formula-free nirvana. Those workshops had their own mystifying rules and
rituals, their own foreshadowed plots. “In this course we’ll find out who among
you has what it takes to be a writer,” one syllabus announced with a Calvinist’s
belief in predestination. “You can’t really be serious about your writing if you
insist on doing composition too,” a graduate advisor told me, unconvinced that
creative writing and composition could be interacting fields of possibility. But though the story is more complex than what I’ve presented here, this sideshadowing experience is foremost on my mind as I approach English 252 with its students who are reluctant, resentful, or resigned. When Tish writes in a journal at the end of the first week, “Don’t approach your story as if it’s a formula. Or maybe you should since that’s worked well for your writing so far,” I hear in her words the echoes of my own.

“I Have Written Stories about Myself and They Are Boring”

During the first week of English 252, I ask students to set aside for a moment the question of what fictional stories they’ll write during this too-short three-week term. Instead, through a range of invention exercises I take primarily from composition teaching, we research experiences and questions from our lives that might provide the settings, situations, and themes for fiction. My aim in this first week is to sideshadow students’ emphatic statements that other than a story written in the third or seventh grades, they “don’t know anything” about fiction. I also aim to sideshadow the story of beginning fiction workshops that take students’ lack of knowledge as a given and so introduce, bit by bit, a mechanics of fiction: “Today we’ll learn point of view; tomorrow we will learn about protagonists and antagonists...” Instead, I want us to stay in this just-getting-started present moment long enough to glimpse the great variety of experience and storytelling knowledge each student really does have, long enough to learn each student’s language for talking about stories that textbook chapters about protagonists, antagonists, and six kinds of point of view would ignore.

For Tish, this first week of writing—without a “clear cut” sense of the purposes this writing will serve—is frustrating. In a listing activity called “I am the one who...,” she writes,

I am the one who... plays softball to please my dad
is a perfectionist
goes to church even though I don’t know why

Beneath this list, she adds,

I want to reveal the insecurities, the fears, and the doubts of an adolescent female. I want to bring in outside characters to cause tension. I want many mistakes to be made.
I want moral confusion and debate. I want to give myself a new identity in my story, to make myself rebel... What I am searching for are specific examples and concrete details to show this maturation.

As other students continue with their lists, Tish sets down her pen, confounded, I think, by more than an absence of purpose. When I explain to her, again, what we are doing this first week and why, she nods: Yes, it makes sense but... On Friday she turns in a packet of selected writings from the week, and in that packet I find clues about why a pedagogy designed to alleviate students’ anxiety about the course is intensifying hers instead.
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Between Tish’s list of perceptions about herself and her description of the story she wants to write is a great gap. She wants to write about rebellion yet defines herself as one who is the rebel’s opposite—the one who plays softball to please her father, who attends church without knowing why. She searches for “specific examples and concrete details” through which to create for herself a “new identity” as a “rebel” who makes “many mistakes.” What appears in her writing, however, are the specific examples and concrete details of a person who has feared ever making a mistake. In a freewriting exercise about the “radical” moments in our lives (a phrase I take from Eve Shelnutt), Tish writes of the day she brought home a B on her report card, “afraid that it would make my mother frown.” On her list of “shimmering images” (a phrase from Joan Didion), she notes the Sunday afternoon when she and her mother shopped at a Wal-mart, following an orderly list, for the things she’d take to college. None of this writing, Tish insists at the week’s end, offers her material for fiction—for creating, that is, exciting characters who launch out on heroic quests, struggle against great obstacles, and experience life-altering epiphanies. In a letter about her first week’s packet of writings she concludes, “So far I have written stories about myself, about my personal experiences and feelings, and they are boring.”

Tish’s belief that her life is “boring” is one I’ve heard expressed by many students—especially women students—across classes and levels. A belief in students’ lack of anything worth writing about is also, too often, shared by teachers of creative writing. In his essay “Assignment,” for example, Ron Carlson glibly summarizes the (dearth of) experience college students bring to his fiction workshops:

[They bring] their natural expertise and understanding of narrative (from thousands of hours studying television programs) and chronology (from having already skillfully survived twenty, even twenty-two years) and dramatic tension (from having lived with their parents) and climatic epiphany (from having loved and lost). (79)

Such is the conventional wisdom—most students have nothing to write about, only a very talented few (a Truman Capote, a Carson McCullers) can produce something worth reading at the age of 18 or 21—that leads creative writing teachers to apologetically conclude, “We can’t teach vision” and “The most we can do is teach them about craft.”

At the end of the first week Tish doesn’t leave class having had a climatic epiphanal moment: “Ah-ha! I see! A story doesn’t have to be about having grand adventures in exotic locales.” She leaves instead with what feels to her very much like a taxing and meaningless assignment—to choose an item from one of her freewrites, to spend an hour over the weekend “loop-writing” (adapted from Peter Elbow) from the freewrite, and to bring this loop-writing to Monday’s class where we’ll begin to ask “What if...?”. Because her writing partner, Peggy, has chosen for her weekend writing an item from her list of “shimmering images,” Tish says she will do the same. She adds, however, that Peggy’s image—of driving down a mountain road at sunrise, leaving a vacation spot and heading home—
“shimmers a lot more than mine.”

To Monday’s class, Tish brings several pages of writing about the Sunday afternoon shopping trip with her mother, still frustrated with this writing, still convinced that she has nothing here worth writing about. As we begin an invention activity in changing perspectives, however, something does happen. Tish begins to write—and then continues writing—the story from what she imagines could have been her mother’s viewpoint:

It’s not like I was unaware that this day would come. For seventeen and one-half years it has been in the back of my mind. And so it has come down to this: You’re going. Really going. Oh, you’ll be back. It isn’t as if I will never see you again. But when you return, you’ll come as a guest. For all practical purposes, you’re gone for good.

“Okay,” you begin, “did you bring our list? We don’t have much time to get this done.”

This in-class writing becomes the opening of a fictional story, “Letting Go,” that Tish spends the next two weeks drafting and revising. The story presents a mother’s imagined dialogue with her daughter as they shop in a crowded discount department store, the mother pondering what else beside a hot pot her daughter will need as she leaves for college.

As she continues drafting, Tish addresses, from a different perspective, her early descriptions of herself as a perfectionist. In a revision activity called “Re-seeing the Argument” (a revision activity I first designed for myself, to enable me to see, examine, and be answerable for the arguments my fictional stories imply), Tish considers that one obvious argument her story makes is that this mother needs to let her grown-up daughter go. She also begins to draw out a second embedded argument: the mother arguing that her daughter needs to let go of her need for others’ approval. Continuing with the mother’s perspective, Tish writes: “But did you ever know that we never expected you to be perfect?” and:

I remember the times when you really didn’t care what other people thought of you. In your faded cut-offs one size too large and “Say No to Drugs” t-shirt, you left your glasses on and your make-up off… You felt at home because you were.

With this writing, Tish’s story begins to grow in its work as a “mode of inquiry into the language of others.” The conflict cannot be summed up as “Mother faces empty-nest syndrome.” The narrator raises many questions about how her daughter has been prepared to go into the world; she faces the conflict of how to voice these questions when her daughter, pushing the shopping cart far ahead, seems to have already gone.

“Letting Go,” I would argue, is thus a “good” story, an “artful” story for what it has to say to me, to other readers. But most important, I think, is what “Letting Go” says to Tish, its sideshadowing, revisionary potential. As Tish works on this story over the next two weeks, she continually returns to, examines, and argues with that sense of herself as a perfectionist. Through this writing,
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she also returns to, examines, and argues with the belief that her own situation isn't worth a story, has nothing to tell her or anyone else. "I found myself exploring my own feelings through this voice," she says in an interview after the workshop's end, "looking at this situation from a new perspective." The story becomes an interlocutor. It talks back to Tish's beliefs about herself and her family. It argues against her initial view that she needs to invent for her story "a new identity." It urges her to re-envision instead the identity she believed she already had and believed she must continue to live within.

"My Story Is Something I Haven't Experienced Yet"
While Tish began the fiction workshop with the belief that a short story couldn't possibly be born from the settings and questions of her life, Alice begins in a different place. "I come into class," she writes in her first-day letter, "with the thought that personal experiences are the key to fiction writing. I almost think that writers must know their subject intimately—be it personal experience, a loved one's experience, or a social construct in which they have lived." From this letter, it might seem that Alice starts this class in a charmed place: with an understanding of fiction writing as coming to know intimately her own situation, with an understanding that this situation is also a social construction to be investigated. Placing the personal and social together, this sentence suggests she's prepared to grasp the significance and import of not-just-singular scenes.

Yet in this letter Alice doesn't write, "I almost think that as a writer, I must know my subject intimately..." Such is what writers must know, but Alice makes clear that she does not define herself as a writer. She describes with admiration a good friend "who has proven herself to be a good writer as an undergrad" and "who seems to have gained insight into herself and become more comfortable with herself because she writes every day." Alice also describes herself in sharp contrast to that friend: as a "researcher" who is "practical" and "scientific." "When I write papers," she continues, "I'm always like, 'It's down, it's done, it's 4:30 a.m. Let's just print the baby out.'" Fiction writing, her letter concludes, could be "therapeutic" for her but she also worries that spending so much time thinking about herself will be "selfish." More, as she prepares to leave home for the first time and begin an optometry program on the West Coast, Alice states she wants to get going with her future and "stop dwelling on the past."

In our first class meeting, I ask students to freewrite a story they frequently tell others about themselves. We then examine these stories to consider when, why, and how they are told; what they can tell us about our uses of stories, our familiarity with storytelling, our questions too about the perspectives and meanings these stories promote or leave out. Alice writes the story of her parents' divorce eleven years before. Or rather, she outlines that story, its effects on her:

My parents were divorcing—more accurately, my father was seeking a divorce from my mother for reasons unknown to me. My mother was now displaying words and signs of resentment for him, and I suppose I paid close attention to her actions because I was gradually assuming this posture as well. I found it difficult to live within the dichotomy
of loving my father and yet resenting him.

This is the experience, Alice says in class, she wants to keep working with, maybe imagining the scene from different points of view as Sandra Cisneros does in *The House on Mango Street*, a novel Alice says she enjoyed reading in a previous class. During the first week, she tries to remember and gather the particular details surrounding her parents’ divorce such as the long walk she took with a friend the day she was given the news. Yet she also continues to voice concern about this “dwelling on the past” and being “too selfish” and “self-centered.” Though she feels a sense of purpose that Tish did not, her writing this first week remains brief and sketchy.

At the start of the second week, as we begin to experiment with perspective and time, Alice continues with the *House on Mango Street* plan, but, unlike Tish’s, her writing changes little from the very first day. In an invention exercise that calls for experimenting with perspective and time, she writes: “My parents are divorcing for reasons unknown to me.” And, “Her parents were divorcing, though the reasons for the divorce were not known to her.” And, “My wife and I are divorcing, though our children do not understand why.” “I was stuck,” Alice explains in an interview after the class’s end. “I was trying to write my past experiences, and that was something that—I hit an inability to talk about such things.”

Especially because she has always prided herself on her research skills and because she had hoped that through Cisneros’ model she’d found a practical, doable plan, Alice grows increasingly anxious about her inability to research this piece of her past. “I talked with a friend yesterday who asked if my story was done,” she writes in a midterm letter accompanying a slim portfolio of writings like those quoted above. “When I told her it wasn’t, she smirked and said, ‘You don’t have much time left.’”

In class Alice articulates another (and very much related) obstacle to her fiction writing: her concern that fiction writing, in addition to being self-centered, can distort the truth. As we discuss two writings by Tim O’Brien—“Beginnings,” a short essay in which he describes receiving his Vietnam draft notice; and “On the Rainy River,” a short story in which the narrator, also named Tim, receives his draft notice—Alice notes with surprise that the fictional story appears more “emotionally truthful” than the essay. “We see so much more of the internal battle the character faces in ‘On the Rainy River,’” she says. “Maybe because he’s calling it fiction and is somewhat removed, he can be more open about what he felt.” These two writings thus sideshadow Alice’s initial view that a fictional story comes directly from and must be patterned according to the facts of the writer’s life; fiction has the potential to show more and say more when the writer is “somewhat removed.” But even so, Alice continues, she’s worried about the story’s manipulations of the autobiographical experience. In “Beginnings,” O’Brien states that he was working at a local country club when he received his draft notice. In “On the Rainy River,” however, the narrator, Tim, works not at a country club but at a slaughter house, an obvious metaphor for Vietnam. For
Alice and others in class, this revision is troubling not only because the slaughterhouse job appears to them as a "lie" but also because it feels manipulative—"Like he's trying too hard to win our sympathy," Mark says. Following Mark's observation, there's general discussion in defense of O'Brien's revision because, as Peggy puts it, "Of course it's manipulative, it's all manipulative. That's what a story does." Still, Alice wonders aloud if O'Brien is "playing fair" with readers and with his own situation. She says this is the reason why she's reluctant to move into fiction—because she wants everything she writes "to tell the truth," especially when it comes to members of her own family.

Paradoxically, it's at about this time that Alice's short story begins to come into being. In class I ask students to try a "flash-forward," to imagine one of their characters five, ten, or twenty years beyond the events in their story drafts. Alice writes about a hospital room. She imagines herself—whom she increasingly refers to as her "narrator" and "character"—visiting her father, hospitalized following a heart attack, though her father has never been hospitalized. In class she writes,

My thoughts are interrupted by footsteps in the hall which echo the peaks on the monitor. Slow. Steady. Foot. Steps. The alternating rhythm of peak and step seems to continue indefinitely. The feet pause outside the door to the adjacent room... I wish that the footsteps had stopped in front of Dad's door, that whomever the feet belonged to would see me staring so intently at my father's face. The person would know that, with my motionless stare, I hope to awaken my father with fierce concentration alone.

This in-class writing becomes the ending of "Perfect Circles," a story that, Alice explains, "hasn't happened to me yet" yet "brings me back to [what has happened] in a way I didn't foresee." At the center of the story is that dichotomy Alice named in her first writing for class: of both loving and resenting the man who is her father, the narrator in "Perfect Circles" both loving and resenting this man in the hospital bed. At the center of the story too is how much her narrator doesn't know about this man, the "truths" she cannot tell (including his reasons for leaving her family and starting another) because she never learned them. The story thus carries on Alice's concern about truthfulness as the narrator examines conflicting truths and acknowledges the many gaps in what she knows.

This story circles Alice in other ways back to her questions about truth, distortion, and "playing fair." In her class writings and discussions, she considers how as a hospital worker she's had to work to see her patients as more than "just tubes and machines," how she needs to see the father in "Perfect Circles" as more than tubes and machines too. During an in-class revision activity she underlines the adjectives that appear in her draft to describe its characters: the father represented as "fierce," "driven," "impatient," "remote," a "type A personality" who has continually "flattened" his daughter's hopes. She then creates a flashback that sideshadows this one-dimensional portrayal. The narrator remembers a time when she was very young and her father lifted her
high, spun her around, and urged her to “touch the circling sky”—a memory that raises for the narrator the question of when this daring to dream changed and why. Reading aloud this flashback in class, Alice stresses that the memory is fiction, not an event she’s recalled from her own childhood. The distinction remains important for her. Yet, she adds, “It could be true. It seems true. I’d like to expand it, do more with scenes like this.” Thus Alice’s question about the story changes from *Does this writing tell the truth about my father and me?* to *How does this story represent the father?*—a question that doesn’t sidestep the problem of representation but addresses it.

Alice’s work on this problem circles out to other students in the workshop as well. Peggy, who initially dismissed Alice and Mark’s concern about manipulation, begins to draft a new scene: “But maybe she wasn’t being entirely fair . . . .” Through this writing, a character in her story set up as a source of antagonism and pot-shot jokes takes on a fuller, not-so-easily-joked-about existence—a fuller existence Peggy finds both fascinating and disturbing because he’s changing her story just as this summer session is about to end.

*"It Lasts for a While, Then Everyone Goes Home"*

In an interview in the Paris newspaper *Le Monde*, playwright and feminist theorist Helene Cixous says she thinks of her latest play as “a moment of conversation” (Perrier, “Notre spectacle” 18) that does not last beyond the final act: when the play is over, everyone will go home, nothing left to say. At the end of English 252, students emphasize that there’s a great deal left to say and do, the conversations started with these stories not yet finished. In a letter accompanying her final portfolio, Peggy (who is majoring in secondary education) writes that her story doesn’t yet have an ending. She explains:

> Originally it was a simple theme—Moira upset with Chris over his work obsession. But now there’s more to him than that and now she is dealing with more—the loss of her ideas about romantic love and her wondering about, “Is this all there is?” . . . does she buckle down and accept that this mundane life is what all adults have and it doesn’t get any better or does she go out—go out where?—looking for romance and magic . . . . Obviously I have some personal issues with this theme. I’m struggling with this for real and the story makes me uncomfortably aware of the decisions I will soon have to make. We need more options . . . .

For Peggy, this unfinished story is more than a moment’s conversation. It has created that uncomfortable awareness of an either/or choice that would decide her own future; it’s created the desire to discover other options for this character and for herself.

With Alice and Tish, Peggy is pursuing difficult questions that require careful analysis, the search for story-altering sideshadows, a consideration of possible consequences. The questions she and other students pose don’t stop their creative activity but recharge it; their acts of criticism open up spaces in their stories for wondering: *What if this mother doesn’t expect her daughter to be perfect? What if there’s more to a character than the adjectives “fierce,” “driven,” and “Type-A*
personality "will allow? What if there are choices beyond "buckle down" or "leave"? It's here especially that I find the revisionary power of sideshadowing as these students move from writing as if the future—for themselves, for their characters—is already fixed to considering what if it is not. This isn't to say that they thus experience a wild, unmitigated freedom with no boundaries, no rules, no principles of reality to get in the way of pure, inventive pleasure. Far from it, they continually test the boundaries that are, always, shaping their stories and characters. At the start of class, Tish wrote, without much certainty, that maybe she will "learn to enjoy a complete freedom in writing." At the course's end, she writes instead about fiction writing as active, difficult work—"a freedom I will continue to struggle with."

Struggling against a foreshadowed plot, testing preset boundaries: This is what's refused in the epigraphs at this essay's start. The English professor and magazine editor, for instance, have an interest in maintaining the division between the work of the critic and the child-like pleasures of the writer. By declaring what writers lack (intelligence, discernment, an ability to engage in in-depth analysis), they define, legitimize, and elevate their own positions. Displacing fiction writing elsewhere, they don’t have to confront the implications of the fictions they too create. They don't have to consider, for instance, how easily they might be saying, "My expectations really weren't that high because I knew he was an American Indian" or "The pursuit of True Womanhood tends to decay in the presence of intelligence"—same syntax, same strategy for elevating one group, subordinating another, and same need for acts of criticism if anything new is to be created.

The work of sideshadowing, the struggle of revision, the dialectic between criticism and creation are likewise what Cixous refuses when she concludes her interview in Le Monde with the usual tired apology for creative writing. This interview also tells me why a writer, even one who has defined herself as an intellectual and activist, would dismiss her own work, right along with the magazine editor, the English professor. Cixous's play, which opened in early 1998 at the renowned Theatre du Soleil, is ostensibly about Tibetan refugees as "victims of Chinese imperialism" (Perrier, "Le Tibet au Soleil" 1). Her account of the play, however, suggests an unacknowledged, not-yet-grappled-with story of French imperialism and the role of the theater in perpetuating colonialist narratives. "Every time," Cixous states, with no edge of irony that I can detect, "we return to dig images out of the theatrical continent that is Asia" (Perrier, "Notre spectacle" 18). Cixous' apology—"It's not the roof of the world, it's only the roof of the theater" and "no one will leave revolutionized" (Perrier, "Notre spectacle" 18)—isn't mere modesty; it allows an orientalist show to go on. Her apology particularly troubles me because other stories might have been told, another play could have been staged had Cixous realized that the act of criticism isn't opposed to the act of creation, recognized that this play will indeed have some uses, is of consequence, and thus asks not for a shrug but for what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "answerability."
"Art and life are not one," Bakhtin argues, "but they must become united in myself—in the unity of my answerability" (2). Similarly, the lives of Peggy, Alice, Tish and the lives represented in their short stories are not one-in-the-same. "Moira," Peggy says in an after-class interview, "is not me. I talk more than she does. I shoot my mouth off. She's quiet, and I think she can see more because of it." Peggy is not Moira and Tish's mother isn't the mother in "Letting Go," not exactly. Still, these characters and stories do speak from and to the lives their creators are living; these students want to be answerable to what these stories might imply, what futures they might foretell, what possible alternatives have been ignored. Peggy hears her story urging her to join with the character Moira in at least one key way: "We both need more options." Tish decides to answer the silences of her short story, this mother and daughter who mostly do not talk, by giving it, nervously, to her own mother to read.

Answerability, however, is what compositionists as well as creative writers avoid when we do not examine scenes of fiction- and poetry-writing as having rhetoricity, and we don't consider that the theorists we are most fond of citing—Bakhtin, for example—have been especially concerned with the social functions and powers of poetic images and fictional stories. Answerability is what we avoid when we draw a sharp distinction between creative and critical genres and classrooms. For example, in a recent review of Cain's Revisioning Writers' Talk, Gregory Clark reinforces the distinction between creative writing, as the book's focus, and "academic discourse," as the proper focus of composition. Cain's study, he writes, was "unsatisfying" because it takes a fiction writing class as its "social context" and fiction writing is, in his understanding, "the most inherently individualistic of written acts" and so the least open to joining composition in taking a "social turn" (420-421). Such a view of fiction writing (not at all unique to Clark) as inherently individualistic implicates compositionists, at least in part, in maintaining creative writing workshops as places where individuals prove their mettle, where students produce stories and poems that may or may not be worthy of publication and thus may or may not be worthy of (post-publication) acts of criticism. Such a view overlooks the social relationships and social ideas that students bring to their writing and want their writing to answer back to: Tish's mother, Alice's father, Peggy's partner; ideas about growing up, letting go, buckling down, reclaiming dreams, telling the truth. (Interestingly, though, Clark's view of creative writing as inherently individualistic and asocial is sideshadowed by the lead article appearing in the same issue of CCC—an article in which Janet Carey Eldred draws on Bakhtin's idea of answerability to dramatize how very social and response-aware "personal" writing can be.)

Another example: At the 1997 Conference on College Composition and Communication, three prominent members of the field joined together for a panel in which they presented stories about their teaching and writing. Their narratives were well-crafted, evocative, complex, and the audience of perhaps 75 appeared very much engaged. At the end of the third story, the panel's chair thanked the audience for their attendance. The panelists pushed away from the
table and stepped off the podium. Even though twenty minutes for this session remained, it ended then and there. For a long moment, the audience members stayed in their chairs, looking at the empty podium, looking at each other. Then, when it was finally clear that no, the panelists weren’t coming back, the audience members got up, trailed out. The message of this panel: Stories are to be told, heard, but not discussed; stories last for a while and then we all go home (perhaps longing for the day when we too have achieved the position and prominence from which to tell our stories without apology and without answerability either). Though I said at the start of this article that I see lively debate among compositionists about how our stories of teaching and learning are composed, this panel tells me that there isn’t debate enough (or that our field has become strangely divided into those who tell stories and those who critique them). And while I applaud collections such as Teaching Writing Creatively and conference calls that explicitly ask for the sharing of stories, I also believe that our ideas of creativity (as evidenced in this panel) continue, dangerously, to place storytelling outside the realm of rhetoric, in a privileged space that’s impervious to the sideshadowing questions of “What’s the argument?”, “From whose perspective?”, and “What if the opposite is also true?”

Looking back over these stories about English 252, I see much I still need to answer for—glossed-over gaps, unacknowledged surpluses, claims I made at this essay’s start that aren’t quite supported by the stories I’ve told. For instance, though Tish re-envisioned the view that her life was too “boring” for fiction, I suspect that she continued to regard this problem of seeing significance as individual, unique to her. The class as I set it up allowed her to proceed as if this is so. But what if the course had enabled her to work on this problem of writing in relation to the history of women writers who have felt or who have been told that their lives are too uneventful for the stuff of stories, who share in her work against this piece of the conventional wisdom?

I also wonder how, if at all, this class gave Alice the means to look again at her concern that fiction writing is a selfish act. In an interview after the class’s end, she appears to have revised this view, saying, “I don’t see it as selfish but very important.” Her words suggest that she now sees in fiction writing, as Lynn Domina puts it, “permission to address one’s personal obsessions” (28). That revision seems real, seems to matter, and yet when I return to Alice’s first-day letter, I see a surplus, something more that might have happened here. “I almost think,” Alice wrote in her first-day letter, “that writers must know their subject intimately—be it a personal experience, a loved one’s experience, or a social construct in which they have lived” (my emphasis). Here is an unpursued opportunity to consider how stories dramatize not only “personal obsessions” but social ideas. Here is the possibility for a class that asks students, much more explicitly than my own class did, to consider the social ideas and roles their drafts represent or take issue with: the idea, for instance, that fathers mark the site of unfeeling law that Alice’s story both represents and questions.

I can imagine too a class in which students read something from the
abundance of work by writers who have likewise faced the social construction of authorship as an entirely individual, selfish activity: Adrienne Rich’s essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”; Trinh T. Minh-ha’s Woman, Native, Other; or any of the essays in Eve Shelnutt’s The Confidence Woman: 26 Women Writers at Work. Maybe—I think now as I plan for a class next fall called “‘Only Connect’: Creative Writing and Critical Inquiry”—such a class would begin with a reading of Sigmund Freud’s “Creative Writers and Day-dreaming” so that we can acknowledge, and question, the widely-shared view of creative writing as an outward manifestation of passive, personal fantasy. Maybe in such a class we would also read Deborah Brandts’ ethnographic essay “Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading,” which makes the obvious, yet startling, observation that while many people feel free to assert that they are readers, they are hesitant about (or socially prohibited from) calling themselves writers. And maybe such a class could end—as English 252 very easily could have but did not—with taking ten-minutes’ time to return to, examine, and discuss our first-day letters.

At the start of English 252, Mark says that maybe this course will help him to write a good resume “since a good resume requires a lot of fiction.” What happened to that view as the workshop continued? How did this view change? Remain the same? In her first-day letter Tish wrote that this class might “give her some new ideas” for teaching writing, though she adds that children need “a lot of structure” and that a “write whatever you want” pedagogy “never works.” How would she approach now these questions of structure, freedom, and what her students might need? And what about all the stories these students, as nurses, teachers, doctors, police officers, parole officers, principals, will tell in the future: about patients and care-givers, about students and parents, about law-enforcers and law-breakers? What difference can their work with perspective, time, and sideshadowed plots, with re-seeing their stories’ arguments and revising to “play fair,” make in the future stories they will daily tell and write—stories that will become official records, stories that will be read rhetorically as forms of argument and proof? Such are the questions we didn’t ask—and needed to ask—at the end of this course.

“However and wherever applied,” Morson writes, “sideshadowing multiplies stories” (120). Sideshadows counter inevitability, finalizability, with the contingent and conditional: Except… and yet… at the same time … I wonder… Through sideshadowing practices of writing and reading, Peggy, Alice, and Tish repeatedly return to their drafts with a sense that these stories didn’t just magically unfold (the “expressive” conception of composing that Bakhtin argues against in his essay “Author and Hero”) nor must these stories adhere to some cookie-cutter recipe for producing fiction (the “impressive” theory of composing that Bakhtin likewise seeks to counter). They return to their drafts with the counter-understanding that these stories are contingent, conditional, always subject to change. Likewise I return to these stories of English 252 with that same sense of shadows, the class that could have been and could still be. Though of course
I think, "You're expecting an awful lot from one class" (Obviously no one will leave revolutionized) and "There isn't time in three weeks or in fifteen to do all that" (It lasts for a while, then everyone goes home), these students—with all they expected from their stories—tell me to expect more, to work for more, to do anything but conclude with yet another apology. Along with Morson and Bakhtin, these students can tell us that time and space are things we do, indeed, have a hand in making and that too often we avoid a potential complication, a disruption, in a classroom, a story, or an essay by saying, "Well, there's just no time for that, there simply isn't room." At the end of English 252, Tish writes that she wants to make more time, more space for working on "Letting Go": "I want Jen and her mother to interact more. I want them to see more, talk more, do more" (Tish's emphases). Yes. Me too.

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Works Cited


