

CHARLES BAXTER AND PETER TURCHI

Introduction

As anyone who has tried to do so very well knows, a person—with the best of intentions—can learn the basics of how to write a story from a book of do’s-and-don’ts and still be unable to write a good story.

This sad (perplexing, dismaying) fact may have something to do with the particular book of do’s-and-don’ts the person chooses, but it has more to do with the gap between rule-governed activity and actual practice in the creation of fiction and with the bewilderment any artist faces in the practice of an art. Acquiring a basic competency in an art or craft is a necessity but will get its practitioner almost nowhere, if we define a “destination” as the completion of a beautiful or solid piece of work. Competency must be allied, must give way, to good judgment, energy, and creativity, which is only to say that anything that is completely rule governed will probably be formulaic, and anything that is merely competent and which lacks passion or vision is not worthy of more than a glance.

Knowledge does not necessarily lead to excellence in execution or creativity in the solution of an aesthetic problem. Knowing the rules, such as they are, and being able to implement them to create a beautiful result are two very different ways-of-knowing, and the gulf between them is large. A how-to book can suggest norms, but it cannot show anyone how to exercise judgment, and that is why teaching—or coaching—creative work is sometimes a hit-and-miss affair. For this reason also, rules for art that may not result in a living piece of art are sometimes referred to as “academic”—useful but perhaps not essential. All this is a terrible tragedy because it means that not everyone can master an art even after learning all the rules, and it is also a great blessing, because it means that everyone who truly practices an art cannot quite tell you how to go about it. Consequently, the book that you hold in your hands does not contain a set of rules but something quite different—what we might call a set of approaches.

The practice of an art is not a complete mystery, to be sure, but its uncertainties need to be unraveled with tact and caution and humility. In the justly famous letter by Chekhov that provides this book its title, he also wrote:

Only the individual who has never written and never dealt with images can say that there are no questions in his sphere, just a solid mass of answers. . . . You are right to demand that an artist take a conscious attitude to his work, but you confuse two concepts: *resolving a question* and *posing a question correctly*. Only the second is required of the artist. In *Anna Karenina* and *Onegin* not one question is resolved, but you are quite satisfied solely because all the questions in them are posed correctly.

In these essays, then, you will find writers considering the questions they ask themselves, questions about craft and about the knowledge and practice that enables a writer of fiction to transcend mere competence. Many of the essays suggest that a practical writing pedagogy might well be approached most effectively through metaphors, one of the only figurative means we have to describe the judgments that are involved, word by word, sentence by sentence, in the creative process. What such metaphors produce is a way of guiding the crucial strategic decisions that arise at every moment in the production of a work of fiction.

This collection is a companion volume to *Poets Teaching Poets: Self and the World*, edited by Gregory Orr and Ellen Bryant Voigt. The essays here, like the ones in that book, emanated from the first low-residency graduate program in writing, which was established at Goddard College in Vermont in 1976 but soon moved to Warren Wilson College in North Carolina, where it has grown and its practices have evolved over the past twenty years. As the editors of that earlier volume observe, in American higher education, the norm in advanced creative writing seminars is to have a mentor guiding a group of less-experienced writers in critiques of their own work, week after week, in workshop format. “The low-residency model,” they write, “sought a supplement and an alternative to this method, within a pragmatic semester structure designed for adults: two weeks on campus to initiate six months of independent tutorial through correspondence.”

The editors of *Poets Teaching Poets* go on to note that the term *low-residency* fails to suggest the instructional advantages of that intense period of conferences, workshops, seminars, and lectures:

Tutorial requires a low student-faculty ratio, which in turn brought together a greater number of practitioners in each genre than is possible in wholly residential programs. Tutorial also needs its correction: a variety of aesthetics, team teaching, and a mixture of new and returning faculty every term. And it was faculty, not design, that pro-

vided the crucial element: innovation does not *always* attract, as it did in this case, the serious and the gifted.

Both volumes of essays began as a series of craft lectures. These lectures became an increasingly significant feature of the program following its move from Goddard to Warren Wilson in 1981. The essays that now follow from those lectures more often than not include readings of literary texts, with analyses that do not function as interpretations so much as professionally guided tours to an understanding of decisions made by the writers concerning subject matter, form, tone, and identity. They were delivered to an audience of students and peers, and they often created and stimulated discussions, controversies, and counterarguments. This is as it should be, as it must be, whenever artists who are in the thick of the practice of their art gather together to offer explanations and justifications of how they go about their work. An artist without strong opinions is likely to cave in to the first pressures that she or he encounters, and good arguments are the product of the clash of strong opinions. Not every argument poisons the well; some clear the air.

The essays in this volume are divided into three categories. The first includes those considerations most often gathered under the catch-all category of formal techniques. These essays comprise two on the subject of voice, one voice being that of Chuck Wachtel, the other that of Steven Schwartz; Richard Russo's essay on point of view, with particular attention to the question of omniscience; Joan Silber's comments on "weight"—the sense of a subject's importance—in short fiction; and Charles Baxter's notes on inflection. Susan Neville considers mindful villainy as a necessary aid to plot, and Jim Shepard warns against the dangers of epiphany. Here, too, we encounter Debra Spark's help on "getting in and getting out" of a story and Ehud Havazelet's observations on Chekhov and form.

A number of the essays begin with a metaphor for the acts of the imagination that result in fiction or the process of fiction making. In this category we find Robert Boswell's meditation on architectural spandrels; Peter Turchi's equation of cartography and fiction writing; C. J. Hribal's commentary on the need for scene setting as the answer to a form of readerly hunger, allegorized wittily as "the scene beast"; Karen Brennan's observations about fictional perseveration and confabulation as seen through the difficult and harrowing recovery of her daughter from a brain trauma; and Antonya Nelson's intricate (and serious) reading of the joke form as an analogy, or base, of storytelling itself.

The last category sees all these activities from a slightly greater dis-

tance, where overall aesthetic strategies begin to touch other realms, particularly the social and political; no purely formal writing tactics can be separated from other matters of equal or greater importance. Here Pablo Medina addresses the issues of politically charged identities in “Literature and Democracy”; Michael Martone asks how the (conventional) ruination of a story might provide its (paradoxical) salvation; Kevin McIlvoy writes letters, as an editor, to a writer who is safely if uneasily dead; Margot Livesey suggests ways of approaching truth itself, in “How to Tell a True Story”; and Judith Grossman reminds us that there are, after all, readers to keep in mind.

None of these essays presumes to tell the reader how to write. The reigning tone here is that of experienced writers making an *offering* to their students and peers of what, by painful trial and difficult error, they have had to learn themselves in order to do their own work. The reader will encounter some faiths and beliefs but very little arrogance. As a result, the essays typically contain a quality of hard-won knowledge that cannot prescribe but can often suggest directions and strategies for those who are still so transfixed by the myriad and sometimes infinitesimal difficulties of what they are doing that they cannot see the overall layout of the field on which they labor.

Reading these essays is a lesson in both the self-sacrificing humility and the discipline of art. In a passage written by Proust (and much beloved by Randall Jarrell) these disciplines and artistic obligations are spelled out in clear detail:

All these obligations which have not their sanction in our present life seem to belong to a different world, founded upon kindness, scrupulosity, self-sacrifice, a world entirely different from this, which we leave in order to be born into this world, before perhaps returning to the other to live once again beneath the sway of those unknown laws which we have obeyed because we bore their precepts in our hearts, knowing not whose hand had traced them there—those laws to which every profound work of the intellect brings us nearer and which are invisible only—and still!—to fools.

This book does not mean to provide—cannot provide—a set of answers. At best it will be suggestive (in the best sense), informative, and inspiring. Instead of blind self-assurance, the authors offer possibilities, assuming that whoever reads this is interested in writing as a life activity over the long haul and knows better than to believe there is an easy route to a destination worth reaching.