

The Envious Sliver

As a teacher I feel like an inventor. Both a rube and a Rube Goldberg in the classroom, installing ropes and levers – whatever’s handy – and finally getting somewhere, the place one could, it turns out, travel to directly. These inventions (from the etymology of *invent*: to find, to come upon) are useful when I’m learning something for the first time and using older ideas in the process. Once I do get to that new place, it pains me to figure out what to do with the repetitive nature of teaching: it’s likely that what I said in one class, something unplanned and appropriate, should later be repeated. The good ideas that happen while teaching need to be remembered and used again, right? There’s fun involved in making the invention as you need it, especially when other hands get involved; without student engagement, the ball would surely thud and the flame fizzle. What should one do with the invention afterwards? It would be inefficient to travel again that circuitous route when now you know the diameter.

Whether Susan Howe repeated herself from semester to semester I cannot know for sure, but my impression was that she did not. I took two classes with her, one on Henry James which she co-taught with Neil Schmitz, the other on early American writing: “Poetics of Conversion.” She drew up her syllabus with gusto, and it felt special to that time and maybe even to us in the class. She hardly if ever referred to her books. There were postscripts through the semester: an article or essay or poem she had just “invented” and made photocopies of for us. It can’t be said too much (I hope): the Library is her Wilderness. (See *The Birth-mark* 18.) And while we had our assigned readings, and we tried to give exploratory presentations, what often really got my attention was a subject (catachresis) or word (“fast”; “cunning”) that had recently become a point of fascination for her.

It’s almost embarrassing the extent to which my dissertation reflects her influence. There was Dickinson (of course) and H. James (check), and during the “Poetics of Conversion” course Moore and H. Crane were also on her mind; I would write chapters on all four. (She was on my dissertation committee.) Then there is the matter of my syllabi now, in particular the one for an early American literature course that focuses on captivity narratives and wilderness tropes. She may not have assigned Thoreau’s essay “Walking” (1851) but I think of her when I teach it. “Walking” is an encomium on wilderness space – the “Wilderness is the

preservation of the World” he says – and concludes with a metaphor that I find simple yet powerful. He warns that “Our winged thoughts are turned to poultry” because materialism was encouraging deforestation, both literally and in the mind; “winged thoughts” require trees for perching and nesting. Also in 1851, “all collapsed” and the masts – where Ishmael had his “reveries” – of the *Pequod* vanished.

There have been many metaphors for the listening artist (aeolian harp, film, radio antenna). Ahab with his chains daring elemental nature to strike. To continue with the tree metaphor for a moment longer: as a teacher it’s easy enough to bring in some recordings of birdsong or a stuffed bird. But what were the creative conditions for the original idea, and can they be recreated? Susan’s example asks that the attempt be made. My own word of choice in my classes is “living”: poetry is a living language; we should engage this book ethically as a living text. Living history. For her the tuning metaphor needs to be an active one: *the hand*. I may be exaggerating this in my mind now, but I remember her talking with her hands. I remember her interest in Moore’s use of scissors – for snipping out newspaper articles – and lately it has been sewing imagery. Of course it is her attention to manuscripts that has made the handiwork most visible. In a 2005 interview she said of Peirce: “As if he thought with his fingers.”¹

There was, in other words, a determined attempt to minimize any disconnect between how she wrote and how she taught, between what we studied and how we studied it. If the text is unorthodox we should likewise be in our engagement with it. That meant thinking of the essay form as inclusive and occasion-dependent, and exploiting the surprise of juxtaposition. From her I realized that academic writing always involves the act of editing: yes, a point of view will be asserted, but also a method for handling and presenting texts. We see in her books a constant dialogue among various voices – certainly a model for the classroom. In my notebook for her classes, one of the first things I wrote was that H. James (who came of age during the Civil War) never forgot the dead.² The same appears true for Susan. But as

¹ For all the people who did not study with her, you’re still in luck: being in class is not unlike reading one of the many interviews she has done. Teaching can resemble the interview, the give-and-take of that genre. In any case, no longer her student officially, I relish them. The one I am citing here is with Jon Thompson in the Winter 2005 issue of the online magazine *Free Verse*.

² It may be of interest that the second thing in my notebook is a quote from Emerson’s “The Poet” that she offered: “All form is an effect of character.”

much as feeling haunted by spirits and words implies that internalization and distillation have been her mode, I think her dominant interest is in space and edges.

“These days,” she says in the 05 interview, “what concerns me most is the space between two facing poems in a sequence. The relation is almost invisible; but not quite.” This space and (in)visible relation between poems is also between quotation and response, past and present, teacher and student; a concern for this space makes her a poet of difference (things set in relation) rather than similitude. “Come to think of it,” she says in a 2003 interview, “Keeping-while-Giving would be a great title for a book on the history of Dickinson’s manuscripts.”³ She had been discussing a family Bible that generations of women had handed down; Dickinson gave her poems to friends but kept them out of print. That phrase strikes me as apt for professors who need to balance their double lives: in theory, the “keeping” (private, writing life) enables the “giving” (public, teaching life). Moreover, while dozens of students are not what a grand-daughter or a circle of friends is, and that phrase connotes something shared in an exclusive way, such exchanges do of course happen in the university context.

One piece of advice she gave me was to starve my habit of pleading ignorance. She also validated a version of it. I would say “I don’t know” or “I haven’t read enough to know” and one time she stopped me with “You do know.” This was strangely revelatory. I reconsidered the figure she had cut: although her scholarship and range of reference were a paragon for me, she refused to see herself as an expert and would tell me to contact so-and-so for more information on a question I had. From the 05 interview again: “Some of us are magpies, cutting this from that and that from this. Borrowing and assimilating according to the emotional dynamics of the materials we choose yes, but also because we lack confidence in our authenticity.” As a writer and teacher I am one of those “magpies” who wonders about “authenticity.” She suggests that this magpie poetics may be characteristically American – in the shadow of European culture. The state of not-knowing can put one in a “new world.” As long as we poets and scholars are still inventing, we are never quite at home.

My title comes from the scene in *Hamlet* where Gertrude tells of Ophelia’s drowning: “There on the pendent [willow] boughs her crownet weeds / Clamb’ring to hang, an envious

³ This interview is with Thomas Gardner in his book *A Door Ajar: Contemporary Writers and Emily Dickinson* (2006).

sliver broke, / When down the weedy trophies and herself / Fell in the weeping brook” (4.7.143-146). In that 05 interview she refers, in talking about Shakespeare, to the Dickinson letter (#1006) which cites that “envious sliver broke” phrase. Susan took it as a “luminous” sign of “aesthetic creativity.” It’s a key bit of evidence that Ophelia’s death was not a suicide. *Envious* sliver? Nature envies Art? Willows were symbols of disappointed love, a human attribution. Ophelia is the real thing. Yet to express herself she mimics the tree, which disdains both the flattery and her closeness – worried about a kind of Ovidian transformation, perhaps. In any case, such a phrase is itself a sliver that one’s hand attracts while climbing trees – up and out for reveries and thoughts.

Esdale, Logan. “The Envious Sliver.” *I Have Imagined a Center // Wilder Than This Region: A Tribute to Susan Howe*. Ed. Sarah Campbell. Buffalo: Cuneiform Press, 2007. 59-63.