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On Editing and Feedback in the Poetry Workshop

CAN POETRY BE TAUGHT?

- THE PRELIMINARY AGREEMENT

No one has ever questioned the benefit of studies for the visual artist, the actor or the musician. Why then has our era accepted at times the notion that poetry needn't be studied? It is true that talent cannot be learned – in any field – but as we know, in Ancient Greece, in the *aiodoi* tradition in Homeric Ionia (8th-9th cent. BC), in Lesbos (7th cent. BC) or in Hellenistic Alexandria (3rd cent BC), in the various meistersinger, troubadour and other European traditions, through the Middle Ages and well into the Renaissance, there used to be schools for poetry. Homer, Sappho or Callimachus stand in the tradition of a school, as do Kalidassa in India or Basho in Japan; in just the same way as there are schools for dance and fine arts today. Broadening a poets' horizons, familiarizing them with various styles and techniques of writing as well as with the writings of different cultures and eras, can only enrich their poetic "tool-box".

However, a student at a poetry class has already answered the question *Can Poetry be Taught?* in the affirmative, in the very act of joining the learning framework. He comes to the school

in order to improve his technical ability and develop his poetic outlook. He has, in effect, signed an unwritten credo, in which he declares that he sees poetry as something that converses: art for the sake of dialogue.

This credo states that self-expression is not sufficient condition for writing poetry. "Art for art's sake" is a hobby like keeping diaries, but in fact it is not art at all. Poetry as art is a commitment to a kind of dialogue, to speech that takes place with an Other. This perhaps seems obvious, as the moments you take your poems out of the locked drawer, the moment you show them to even one other person, you are in a dialogue. In every act of human speech we aim at communication, but in "art for art's sake" it is ostensibly enough to have expressed ourselves. So, okay, no one can forbid you to write "cat cheeseburger caught to kitchen Kate" and to publish it as a poem, but only with an extravagant and far-fetched interpretive effort will anyone find any meaning in it. Of course, a poem is not only discourse with somebody else, and communication too is not a sufficient condition for writing poems. The means here are no less important than the content, and in fact create content. But this is not the point: it is possible to argue about to what extent the manner and the technical quality of a poem should come at the expense of the transmission of the message in it – but such a debate will be in the context of an unwritten agreement about a reasonable level of communicative comprehensibility, about art for the sake of dialogue. Without this, there is no teacher and there is no learner, there are no standards and there are no criteria.

EDITING AND FEEDBACK - TO WHAT END?

The combination of the notions of Romanticism and the modern injunction to "Make it New!" has created an idealized image of the born poet, who opens his mouth and speaks poetry just as the lark opens her mouth and bursts into song. Of course, in no case and at no time has this been the situation. There is a talent for language, but language is something that is acquired; there is a talent for poetry, but poetry too is something to be learned. As in any profession or human endeavor, poets have always learned on their own and from others.

An experienced poet's feedback on the work of a novice poet can be given from two different perspectives: as a model – and as a guide.

A veteran poet who sets himself up as a model for imitation does not teach his students to develop their own voice, but rather in most cases produces clones of himself. When the experienced poet has a strong poetic personality, the students identify what is correct and incorrect in their work not according to universal poetic criteria but rather in accordance with how close their own poems come to the style of the veteran poet who is offering himself as a model.

A poet who wishes to serve as a guide to his students will try to develop their personal voice; he will also protect them from themselves and repulse their attempts at imitation. As a guide, he will evaluate their work in its own right and not in comparison to his own poetry.

Consciously or unconsciously, the instructor-guide can give his students feedback in two different ways: as an editor or as a teacher. These two ways are not necessarily contradictory or mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they are complementary.

In their capacities as editors, veteran poets often transmit their own tastes, understandings and views in a decided way, but in one that is neither considered nor methodical; they make use of various considerations and standards, but do not necessarily pass these on. The capacity of teacher, however, demands of the instructor practical and empirical guidance that entails the conscious transmission of poetic standards and systems of considerations.

In this kind of guidance, it is expected that resistance will arise: the forces of creativity also erupt in the soul of the person who is inexperienced in expressing himself and every poem, no matter how good it is, has in the eyes of its creator enlarged significance from the very fact that it is the concentrated expression of his inner world that has been brought out into the world. This is something that is truly valuable, and any critical dealing with the results of the creative process is, in the nature of things, something that is extremely sensitive.

Often, no one has given responsive guidance to the young poet previously, and no one has shown him how to learn the craft of making poetry. No one has told him that this craft requires practice and professional knowledge that has been consciously acquired. All this is new to him, and sometimes quite shocking. Editors know from experience how difficult work with beginning and inexperienced poets can be. While the editor sees himself as a "master-reader," and as a skilled advisor on their poetry, novice poets do not know how to evaluate his contribution and are liable to feel threatened and even insulted by the very fact of the intervention in the most sacred thing of all, their poems.

A teacher of editing does not "give feedback" in the sense of grading a poem or determining its value. As in every field, the

aim of instruction is to make instruction unnecessary – that is, to give the beginning poet the tools for editing his own work in a satisfactory way. In order to succeed in this, the teacher’s role – both professional and psychological – demands a lot more than this: he is the Reader, with a capital “R,” the Other who hears fully and precisely the poetic message in its contents and its way of going about things – and who communicates his insights to the student. He does this so that the student can nurture the “Other” inside himself, the interlocutor with whom he communicates as the “Not-I” within the self; so that he will be able to create within himself an inner reader to whom he speaks. As this inner reader becomes more skilled and sensitive, the poet’s technical ability will increase and will not constitute an obstacle when he comes to express himself in his poetry. A skilled “inner reader” is an internal editor who applies poetic considerations. The more the inner editor is imprinted on the poet’s creative and expressive imagination, the more he becomes an integral part of the very act of writing.

METHOD

1. Feedback and Editing

The work of self-editing demands of the participant, often for the first time, a discipline of dialogue. As strange as this may sound, it demands of you to listen carefully to your own ideas and to demand of yourself that you express them in a committed way. In short, a beginning poet is required here to give an accounting of himself – to himself. If you have written “a cucumber as green as grass,” you are required to think again about

the value and the aim of the connection that you have created between "cucumber" and "grass."

If you have written "a cucumber as green as the hope of an autumn morning in an apartment in North Tel Aviv, 2015," you are required to think about what there is in this that communicates your experience to your reader in an accessible way, and what in this is private code. Perhaps it suffices for the cucumber to be "as green as morning hope?" Is what is detailed in "an apartment in North Tel Aviv, 2015" important at all? And if so, perhaps the matter demands a more communicative detailing, to make it clear what the connection is between you and that apartment. And so on and so forth. In the end, it is possible to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the idiosyncratic, about the strategy of metaphors and, more deeply, about what in fact is important for us to communicate in a poem.

In order to reach the student in this kind of work and also in order to give him something in a way that he can accept, it demands a considerable amount of empathy. You are required to identify with him, to take upon yourself for a moment his emotions and his ideas as if they were your own, and at the same time to be his "Other" in an uncompromising way.

The approach that I have developed over the years is the approach of "the common reader." I realized that in order to point out a problem of any sort, I must not be any wiser than the poem. On the one hand, I must not express positive or negative evaluations of the poem. Even if I do not detract from the value of the poem but rather praise it without an explanation of what works in it and why – I am not contributing anything to the writer's ability to evaluate his work on his own. On the other hand, I must not "interpret" the work and I must not

suggest additions or explanations that are based on my own experience. No! By doing so, I would be giving the poet discounts and covering up for the weaknesses in the poem.

On the contrary. I must ask in all innocence what that small apartment in North Tel Aviv, 2015, is all about. What does it have to do with the cucumber or even with hope? Ah-ha! – it was then and there that you decided to give up drinking and gambling and become religious?! And who knows this, apart from you yourself? What do you think – will readers understand this, or not? Or—What an idea: the cucumber and its green color are fresh like the hope at the beginning of a new day! Do I understand this correctly? Great! But does it matter whether this hope happens in that small apartment or on the banks of the Amazon? What do you think that this adds here for us?

This way of speaking is not just friendly tactics: these questions are themselves the very system of considerations that is the real aim of the instruction. The poem itself is incidental – today this poem is being edited, and tomorrow another – but the system of considerations remains, for better or for worse. These questions are in effect a description of the movement of critical thought, which is what – more than any specific correction at hand – is what you want to instill in the student.

Through the repetition and the learning of this process of examination, standards are created in a way that is experiential and not abstract. After several instances of spending time on it, you know, for example, what a metaphor can carry on its back and what it cannot. You know that if you expand the vehicle of the metaphor too far you will turn it into an image or a new tenor of a different metaphor that will weigh heavily on the clarity and comprehensibility and will put to strain on

the metaphorical structure that you have built. You generalize rules from your particular experience, from your own poems, and after a while you can see how these work in poems written by other people as well.

You also acquire technical acuity: let's say that "cucumber" chimes with "November. Is this sufficient reason to put in a time element here or not? Even if the poem is built on patterns of sound, would the coupling of "green" and "morning" not be sufficient here? In the end, perhaps you will change a word, or maybe you will decide to put in the time element only for the possible rhyme – but the real difference is that suddenly you are reading the poem not as a mere outburst of creativity, but rather in a discriminating reading in depth.

This is not to say that everything is acquired easily. There is a psychological aspect to writing instruction, which sometimes borders on therapeutic work, and the responsibility that is demanded of the instructor can be extremely weighty. This aspect is entirely dependent on the personality of the poet who is receiving instruction and therefore I shall not go into this issue here.

Rather, I will now discuss two examples of fairly predictable and common problems that are inherently connected to the process itself.

Often a poet whom you have instructed comes back to you after a while and says to you in barely restrained panic that because of all those questions he can no longer think poetry spontaneously. Again and again you are required to take in his crises and his difficulties and to continue to illuminate the uphill road that for him is still in the dark. You have to point out to him what he has already learned, even the smallest thing, and to explain to him how every skill and proficiency is yours only

when it becomes an inner habit, almost like the way we have learned to ride a bicycle or drive a car. This phase, during which the writer paralyzes himself with an excess of self control, can also be made easier for him by means of various techniques: the practice of "free writing," for example, can release him to a considerable extent from the inner censorship that he is applying.

For the sake of those who may not be familiar with the technique of free writing, a brief explanation is in order: the student is asked to stop all other activities and cut himself off entirely for a period of twenty minutes every morning, for time in which he will try to write without pause and put his thoughts down on paper without censorship, filtering, planning or shaping. He does not need to share this with anyone, nor need he go over these materials unless he chooses to do so.

Another challenge is connected to the assignments that are given during the course of this instruction. It is important that the student makes some use of the insights, the considerations and the criteria that he has discovered, and apply them to the poems that were discussed at that particular meeting. Here too there is a reluctance to re-work the same poems, and sometimes there is a tendency to give up on them entirely. It is important for a beginning poet to arrive at achievements in the treatment of his poems in real time. Going back into a poem that has already been completed has a great deal of value that embraces more than just the revision of the poem.

Part of what is learned during the course of the class is how to put into our consciousness various "Others" as needed and by conscious decision – for example, how to be the tree about which we are writing, or alternatively – the carpenter who has built a chair from it. The student learns to see every figure in the poem in his imagination to the extent that he could de-

scribe it in detail if he wanted to. He learns how to don moods, places and times as accessible realities.

In the same way, he is required to learn how to enter himself, and this in fact is far more difficult, but also worth the effort. He must go back inside the poem that was written, say, a year and a half ago. This is a move that requires guidance. A move like this demands flexibility and that you agree to be both here and there at one and the same time. You go into the poem again with an "I" that is different to one extent or another from the "I" that wrote the poem back then. Let us say that this is the poem we have spoken about, with the green cucumber of hope, but now that hope seems completely illusory or, contrariwise, it has already come true. This is perfectly alright, of course. It is possible to go back inside the poem from a new mental place, and it is completely legitimate that in the re-editing of the poem new nuances will enter it that were not there before. This still requires a certain amount of discipline: if because of a sense of disappointment that the poet is feeling today, that cucumber's green color will turn violently pickled and vinegary and it will be an entirely different poem; however, if we remember that the hope is an integral part of the disappointment or of the sense of achievement that we have today, it will make it easier for us to see that place again in the context of today.

In instruction on editing, technical issues also come up quite frequently, with regard to which you need do no more than point out a faulty meter or a limping rhyme, and return to the material that has been studied. This is no less important.

When the aim is teaching and not only editing, the threshold is not simply publication quality, but rather far more than this. There is no reason to let go of relatively "small" problems, or to say that you would publish the poem by virtue of what

there is in it, or that it is worthy of publication *despite* this or that problem that remains in it. The aim is learning, and therefore, if there is not a time limitation, it is desirable and worth it to spend time on every issue, large or small, that arises from reading the poem.

2. *Group Work and Individual Work*

Throughout the years I have given sessions on feedback and editing in two frameworks: a group framework during class meetings and individual sessions during editorial meetings.

GROUP WORK takes place at class sessions, when the discussion is conducted on the basis of this same strategy of questioning and probing, but the system of considerations and the criteria are instilled through group dialogue. As group ethics and methods, the participants first learn to refrain from evaluations and to stick to pointing out problems or achievements in a reasoned and considered way. In other words, I make it clear to them that here we don't say "I loved this" or "This doesn't speak to me." Everyone is invited to express an opinion, but you must explain specifically what you think works or does not work in the poem, why, and how.

I also refrain from any dictation or preference with respect to style. The poem is judged by the stylistic criteria that it takes upon itself and not according to any preferred model. If, for example, the poem under discussion is a sonnet, it must deal with or confront the demands of the sonnet genre. If the poem is a list of factual descriptions, it must be effective in this way. If it is figurative, it must create the figure and transmit it to the reader in an effective and vivid way.

In the group we relate to the poems of a number of participants at each meeting. The poems are selected in accordance with the topic that is the overall theme of the course, which is discussed in a poetics class and later on practiced in the writing exercises and the workshop on principles of translation, which are all part of my courses' curriculum. If the theme, for example, the line break and the stanza, which is treated at the first course, we look at poems by the students through this particular lens. If the theme is figurative language, then the poems that are discussed illustrate the treatment of metaphors, similes, metonyms etc. If the theme is closed forms, we may look at haikus and sonnets, and so on.

The treatment of the poems is less intensive and revealing than in the individual work, and sticks close to the issues that are related to the general focus of the session so that the entire group can benefit from the scrutiny of them. This is not the place to go into why "a cucumber as green as the hope of an autumn morning in an apartment in North Tel Aviv, 2015" is a phrase that covers up the real statement that hasn't been made, and what it is exactly that the writer has decided to conceal here. In the group it suffices simply to point out the phenomenon as food for thought. Often the place where the writer's fear lies is where the power resides, but not every environment is suitable for directing a writer to this transformation.

Group instruction is also a source of questioning, argument and consultations in the framework of a dialogue among the participants themselves, and affords them reciprocal feedback and open discourse about issues that in all likelihood they had not previously seen as subjects for legitimate discourse and had never discussed with anyone before. In addition, in guided feedback of this sort, in which poems written by your fellow

group members are discussed, you yourself are less threatened and it is easier for you to arrive at discriminations and formulate them for yourself. In this way the participants acquire editing skills, and the feedback that they give not only helps them to absorb poetic standards, but also affords them a language of feedback that they can also give others. Quite a number of my class groups have gone on after completing the program to hold meetings among themselves, and have used –and are using – the editing tools they acquired in order to give group feedback to new poems by their fellow group-members. In the case of a few of the groups, this practice of mutual feedback has continued for years as a fruitful dialogue.

INDIVIDUAL WORK is best begun only after some group meetings; although in the group work there is also an element of social anxiety, in the end the process is also liberating. It gives the participants a view of the work process from the inside and from the outside, creates proper proportions and work habits and lowers the threshold of vulnerability prior to the individual work. There are conclusions that arise from observing feedback on the work of others and taking part in it, and there are advantages to learning in the graduated and less intensive steps of the method of working before beginning the stage of individual meetings.

The individual meetings follow the method of feedback that I have described, without constraints or additional aims. At the end of each individual meeting the student is asked to apply what he has understood, in his writing, so that the principles will not remain abstract. As in the end we are not dealing with theory but rather with poems written by poets, it is important to understand that the process of internalization really begins with the praxis, when the considerations are applied in the re-

editing of previous poems. The more the student internalizes this system of considerations, the more it is also expressed in the writing of his new poems.

After two or three individual meetings with the assignments between times, the method is sufficiently well-understood for additional work by E-mail. Using this method, I work with the students not only on their own poems, but also on the editing of their translations from English.

EXAMINATION OF RESULTS

The creative process as well as the processes of internalizing and applying vary from poet to poet. This is a matter of personality, and with experience, it is often possible to predict its implications. Over the years it has become fairly clear to me that a distinction must be made between short-term results and long-term results. Roughly, I would say that there are poets for whom a poetry class stimulates an outburst of creativity during the course of the class itself, and others who retreat a bit – to a defensive position, and who are sometimes overwhelmed by all the interaction, the wealth of information and the implicit or explicit competition in the group. There is no guarantee that a poet of the "creative outburst" type will continue to write, whereas the "retreating" types are not more likely to stop writing. It would seem that will-power and the choice of poetry as a way of life are what decide this. It often happens that an outburst of writing floods the "retreaters" only after the program is over, and it also happens that some of the "creative outburst" types are unable to continue without the intensity and the dynamics of the class. And of course it happens that sometimes

a class consists of particularly talented people, and sometimes less so.

Apparently, then, the test of the result of the quality of the poems is not sufficient here.

Then where have we succeeded and where not? Well, a comparison of a participant's poems before the program and after it is the basic measure that every instructor will adopt for himself intuitively after he has completed his work with the participants. I do not wish to say that this is a flawed or deficient measure. On the contrary, such an examination will mostly reveal encouraging results and considerable achievements, and it is very valuable.

However, if we recall the previous distinction between the "creative outburst" types and the "retreating" types, we might well hesitate to rely entirely on a comparative evaluation of this sort upon the completion of the program. What I would like to say is that the problem lies in written "proofs" and not in our knowledge of the process itself. It is not always that a significant turning point can be discerned in the work of those who wrote little during the course of the program, but in fact you do know whether the reason for this is that the writer has not internalized anything, or whether what he has internalized has not yet been expressed in his writing.

Towards the end of the program, often code questions – "Is there a tenor here?" "What's the situation?" or "What does this line-break do?" – suffice to enable the writer to see the problem for himself and suggest solutions. In this close and continuing dialogue it is quite clear in the end what you have succeeded in transmitting and what not.

But this is not yet all.

Guidance in self-editing does not rely on editing questions

like these and their successful solution. It seems to me that the very fact of teaching editing makes certain assumptions and refutes others. With all the encouragement that is given in the class to every style and way of writing poetry, we nevertheless do have one basic and compulsory assumption. To put it simply: art is quality of communication.

CONCLUSION

Refining the capabilities of his "inner editor" is the life's work of every poet. Although often his self-learning in this area becomes conscious and articulated in the learning that we offer – if we have really succeeded, this is only a beginning. The discussion that embraces the manner and the contents of the poetical work comes down in the end to a re-examination of the commitment to writing that you take upon yourself, towards the work, towards the reader and towards yourself.

It seems to me that the insights in this matter that a poet takes from a creative writing workshop are no less important than the textual skills he acquires, and perhaps even more important.

To sum up, I would like to formulate for myself these basic insights that I am trying to transmit onwards from the work of instruction:

1. Art without training and skill is a creative outburst, but it is not yet a way.
It is skill that allows the artist freedom of expression. Without it, any artistic achievement, however brilliant it may be, is a climax with no foundation.

2. Limited control of the poetic tool is liable to become a "style" that will exhaust itself after some time. It is training that enables effortless movement of thought given to expression in and of itself; control of poetic tools enables the free use of form and enables development and growth that are not bound by a style.
3. Learning to control the tools of poetry is skill in the use of form and manner; training the poetic muscles is the skill of the movement of thought.
4. Pass it on.

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Or gave readings and lectured in dozens of festivals and conferences worldwide. He is the recipient of Israeli and international poetry awards, including the Pleiades tribute (SPE 2000) for having made "a significant contribution to modern world poetry", the Fulbright Award for Writers, the Bernstein Prize, the Levi Eshkol Prime Minister's Poetry Prize, the Oeneumi literary prize 2010 of the Tetovo Poetry Festival, the Wine Poetry prize 2013 of the Struga Poetry Evenings and the 'Stefan Mitrov Ljubisa' international literary Award 2014 of The Budva City Theater. He was also awarded several poetry fellowships, among them fellowships from Iowa University; the University of Oxford; the Literarische Colloquium, Berlin; the Heinrich Böll Foundation, Ireland; and the Hawthornden Castle, Scotland.