

## *SAMPLE GREEN SHEETS*

*The examples gathered in this booklet were written during previous residencies. They make use of a variety of approaches, but most fall into the three categories noted below. Obviously, some evaluations draw from each of these styles, or different classes occasion different approaches. We hope that these sample evaluations will inspire Green Sheets that are valuable for you this residency.*

*The annotation response:* A shaped and articulate, thoughtful recounting of the class or lecture and its applicability. The student often presents each evaluation within a framework of relevance, opening with "What I was pleased [or *surprised* or *grateful*] to learn in this lecture [class, bookshop, etc.] was..." before moving into a much wider realm of discussion. These types of evaluations are usually highly engaged, searching accounts, with direct commentary on the presentation itself as well as its relevance to one's own writing.

*The bifurcated "What I learned/how it applies to my work" model:* Some students divide the page with a line, using the top half of the page for full-sentence observations, quotes, and questions prompted directly from the presentation, followed by a separate, more formulated set of questions, musings, "riffs," commentaries on relevance, a summary of its value to him/her. A few divide the page between observations and a summary of/commentary on the presentation itself and its applicability. Many move back and forth between observation and response (question, reaction, challenge, etc.) throughout the page.

*How this applies to me:* Some students focus their evaluations *solely* concentrating on the applicability to their own work. Faculty presentation might be noted in passing, but these actively engaged, pragmatic accounts focus on how the writer had just learned might be useful in their own work.

## FACULTY CLASSES/LECTURES

### CHARLES BAXTER: Dramatic Interventions: The Request Moment

Charlie illustrated the way request moments serve as powerful, dynamic forces within our fiction. He referred to them at one point as “spark plugs,” and I also came to think of them as having the kind of energy to either set the narrative engine going or keep it running. Part of this power comes from the space requests occupy. Neither advice or commandments, requests (those with some urgency to them) place characters in a predicament where “yes” or “no” answers, action or inaction, all have consequences capable of impacting, for starters, the trajectory of the dramatic action and character. The predicaments created by these requests also reveal context, helping to develop situational subject matter, including social/historical context, and psychological subject matter as the request touches upon the ethical obligations placed upon our characters.

In my own prose, I saw the opportunity to put this idea to work immediately. First, I’m interested in looking at recent drafts to see where the “requests” fall on the advice/request/command spectrum. Very often, my characters are on either end, giving advice or commanding those around them to do something. Not that I’m going to then revise all of my stories to hinge upon a request moment, but I do see that there’s a way such moments could heighten tension and further the plot in even smaller scenes. For instance, I have a section of dialogue in a story that could take on more energy. When the protagonist asks his wife why she keeps her pregnancy tests (and keeps peeing on the strips) now that she’s pregnant, she replies that they’re reassuring, and then he asks her why she doesn’t take them back to the store. Not that this needs to shift, but it’s just fun to think about what would happen in that scene with another line or two of dialogue, perhaps if he asks her to take them back to Wal-Mart. The request, in this case, is loaded by their history of fertility clinics, many false attempts at pregnancy, and the couple’s eventual pregnancy, all set against the backdrop of the husband’s disinterest in having children.

As far as lectures go, I thought this was superb. I particularly appreciated the way Charlie structured the material and allowed it to unfold through the investigation of textual examples, especially Shakespeare. The ideas were detailed so clearly that I felt I could take it to the workbench immediately, and yet I’m also glad he included the insights on a request’s ability to reveal ethical obligations, the ability for the response to the request to highlight contrast and conflict, and the role in terms of plot. My only request would be to hear the musical setting of “From Far, From Eve and Morning” louder. It was so beautiful! This is somewhat unrelated, but I love that the “quick” after “take my hand” receives one and a half beats in that 4/4 measure. The “fastest” word in that measure of monosyllables is given the most breath and time. The possibilities in this moment—for tension, disjunction, contrast, wonder—are marvelous.

## MAUD CASEY: Sensibility: Linger in the Strange

I always love Maud's lectures, mostly because she says things in a beautiful and memorable way, but also because in a way that allow me to remain affected by what she says (and I always find myself adding her class texts to my reading list after she recommends them through her lectures). Her lecture on sensibility began with a general discussion of sensibility, how we define it, how we can tell what (and where) it is in a work of fiction. It exists only as a series of contradictions, what both sinks and rises in a story, what is both ethereal and subterranean. Maud says, "Voice is the instrument sensibility plays in order to make itself heard." She compares it to spirit photography, in that it's the soul wafting across the page, the visceral force (rather than report) of a character's experience. It is something to be conjured, rather than engineered. She discussed three ways to do this conjuring, across three different texts. I have to say, though I know I need to pay special attention to the techniques people recommend for achieving things in stories, I cannot help but respond to and be enchanted by the psychology behind the approaches they explain. For example, when Maud discussed a technique she called "linger in the strange," she said, of *The Vet's Daughter's* eerie, expectant, innocent narrator, "it's about allowing a kind of randomness to creep in; waiting a beat or two longer before motoring to the next important moment." I took this to mean that when we have a protagonist with a particularly singular mind, it's often what they notice or interpret in an insignificant moment that produces sensibility, the so-called by-products of what moves the story forward. It's this expansive, roaming, energetic mind that creates a memorable or noticeable sensibility. We must be metronymic, Maud says – write stories that foreground as important all that's suggested by being omitted. She also discussed, as methods of creating sensibility, using ghosts and ghostliness – things that haunt characters with their absence as much (if not more than) with their presence, and also using the private moment, things that are so secret, they are almost meant not to be seen, by us or anyone else. The parts, Maud says, to which you don't have access make you believe more thoroughly in the parts to which you do. Sensibility

is something that cannot be directly addressed or interrogated – it's something that happens on the periphery. And we are only certain of its existence, like Maud says, because we will never be fully certain. "It eludes us," she says; "and it should.

## D'ERASMO: The Space Between: Simultaneity, Mutuality, Shared Interiority and the Creation of Intimacy in Fiction:

This was an extremely useful lecture for fiction. How to define intimacy in a story? How to make characters seem to love each other, or be close in different ways? How to create intimacy from a "textual atmosphere..." Being John Malcovitch was a great example for a way of showing shared consciousness. "Meet you in Malcovitch!" I was fascinated by the idea of one character imagining into another being an extremely intimate event, such as in Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow*. Here you have "testimony that never happened about a murder that actually did...the book is a kind of reparation for a failure of empathy." The imagining is a return to this empathy. I love the technical device of the subjunctive as a means of showing intimacy—an "intense act of imagination" becomes "a world-making intimacy." There are so many ways one character imagining into the life of another can be used to create striking intimacy; there is a narrator who does so: "Deepest and most powerful intimacy is in the act of the imagination" in both Maxwell and Bowen. We examined Lawrence's way of writing about sex. There is a profound discomfort, almost a violence in how he writes about it—a tearing of self into another: Lawrence shows us "poetics of primal drives could tell us something about how to be in the world... way out of the prison-house of self... into a larger or much larger consciousness." In the quote we read, Lawrence writes from the perspectives of two lovers—there is an intimacy in the narrator moving from one into the other: "a shiver, a sickness of new birth passed over her, the flame leaped up him, under his skin." For Lawrence, "romantic love can be such a powerful experience of the other's presence" that it "expands your soul." This can be a very disturbing, uncomfortable experience. I love the way D'Erasmus writes about this: "intimacy snatches you out of yourself...causes the characters to feel uncertain, off-balance." This kind of intimacy is "not for the feint of heart." A final category of ways to evoke intimacy is the use of the image. For example, in the Woolf quote, the flame at the dinner table does so: "some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together" —V. Woolf. The way Woolf describes the candle-light includes the reader in a shared consciousness. Finally, in Baxter's "The Soul Thief," in the love-making scene, the image is the metallic bird: "like a little metallic bird unused to flight, unsteady in its progress..." Through this image the two characters switch places—there is a psychological complexity in this image—a movement away from and back into the self. Finally, I love D'Erasmus's comment that in all these books there is a "huge amount of displacement, and creating intimacy in this other place." Splendid lecture!

## STEPHEN DOBYNS: Poetic Closure

- Closure: 1) in human affairs, putting something behind; 2) in poetry, it can mean that something lies ahead.
- Closure doesn't have to mean finality. It can work to give back to the meaning of each reading. Otherwise, the work just becomes the telling of an anecdote.
- Larkin: Poems should be theatrical in operation.
- Four types of closure: 1) visual closure - shape of poem on page; 2) syntactic - place where sentences end; 3) narrative closure - literal narrative events coming to an end; 4) contextual closure - last 2 lines, something happens that allows us to reflect back on the poem as a holistic entity.

I like the idea of poems as theatrical in operation. The fact that a poem that doesn't "succeed" (I'll use that word loosely) becomes merely an anecdote speaks to the empirical irony from Ellen Bryant Voigt's lecture. When a poem doesn't offer a kind of excess meaning we have to wade through, it's hard to achieve contextual closure—the kind of closure that propels the reader to reflect back on the poem as a whole after reaching some revelation or pivotal event. Prior to this lecture, I viewed closure as something a poem could tend toward or away from in its trajectory. In annotations this semester, I spoke of a poem tending away from closure and opening out into a larger space, tending away from a sense of finality. Dobyns suggested that closure and finality aren't interchangeable, and I'm beginning to align myself more with that belief. My conceptualization of closure was largely narrative before this lecture. I appreciate now having the language to consider visual closure that can be found in the shape of the poem on the page, syntactic closure that occurs in the places where sentences end, narrative closure that happens when the narrative events reach an endpoint, and contextual closure that often can be found in the last few lines, the space in which something happens that allows us to reflect back on the poem as a new and different holistic entity. Our understanding of the poem and its characters and speakers has changed because of these final lines, and we can now return to the poem, re-explore and dredge up the excess meaning that life (and hopefully poetry) has to offer.

## X DAVID HAYNES: Don't Look at the Basement: The Charms of Discrepant Awareness

Last semester, someone shared with me that they found David's lectures excellent because he has a gift for taking complicated topics and making them accessible. I couldn't agree more. Last semester he did this with nested stories, and the same held true for this lecture on dramatic irony and discrepant awareness. The time flew by, in a good way, and I found myself disappointed when lunch rolled around. I think we all could have stayed, happily, in the lecture hall for another hour.

I particularly appreciate that David focuses on a text and we tease that jammie apart during the course of the class. This story by Oates' couldn't have been better for showing different levels of narrative consciousness and how that discrepant awareness creates certain effects in the narrative and in the reader. I found myself circling around to David's two points regarding the location of the consciousness in the story and the release of information—i.e., that these two elements would provide us clues as to how Oates created this discrepant awareness, as well as the ways in which focal distance, characterization, and juxtaposition aided in this. I saw punctuation as a tool here, as is a sort of slippery narration that moves, within sentences, between phrases in close third that are aligned with the narrator and others that read as an older, more removed narrative awareness.

Though we didn't talk about it as much, this brought up questions of pacing for me, of course related to the release of information, and I see this as directly related to the interests I've long held in dramatic irony and melodrama. I think a question we have to ask ourselves is why these stories are so satisfying and powerful to read. Placing the reader in the privileged position of having information the characters do not gives a certain kind of thrill, but perhaps also raises interesting questions around our moral/ethical responsibility and what gives us pleasure. I see discrepant awareness working for a few beats in my thesis, in part so that the moment of high drama is seeded and not just thrown in the reader's lap. But I see discrepant awareness at work in some of my favorite authors or stories. Flannery O'Connor comes to mind.

A question for me is when is this kind of awareness right to use? I think the story will make those demands on the narration, either through the release of information or my sense, as I'm writing and then revising, of the info gap between who knows what and how.

## TONY HOAGLAND: Information, Layering, and the Composite Poem

This lecture spoke to me—quite literally, because I'd been workshopped by Tony the day before and he had advised me that I could make my rather flat poem heroic if I broke out, went deeper, accessed a wilder content. When I met him later that day, I expressed doubts about my ability to do those things. Tony assured me that hitting this kind of wall was common, suggested varying my diction by bringing in "reported speech" from other sources, and suggested poets whom I might read to get past it. But this lecture, delivered the following morning, offered additional strategies, in greater detail, by discussing the virtues of the composite poem and the ghazal as examples of alternative forms that might help a poet break out of habits of pursuing linear logic, assuming cause and effect, and wrapping things up in a neat conclusion. I felt the lecture addressed my problem directly, and in fact, Tony told me our conversation was one among many that had gone into its making. The fact that the composite poem avoids the "pitfall of the romantic temperament" strikes me as a personal advantage.

Tranströmer (in the examples cited) makes the composite poem look easy—"Oklahoma" is mysteriously moving—although I doubt that it is. Tony's list of characteristics is a pretty complete road map, but I imagine that choosing and arranging the data and disparate voices, the subjective and objective parts, so that they "haunt each other" is the challenge. "Spring Drawing 2" seems a particularly enigmatic example: you can map it, yet it's hard to say how it works, especially the middle four stanzas. I plan to read Tranströmer and Hass.

Ghazals were considered in less detail, but the form interests me, particularly the idea of their circularity and paradox. I plan to try both these types of poems. I was attracted by Tony's statement that "the composite form can be an ally" allowing you to reach outside the mode you think of as your voice, and that these forms can "provide access to mysteries which you have accidentally excluded yourself from." (The key word, in my ear, is "accidentally" and not "constitutionally.") I am feeling more hopeful.



## HEATHER McHUGH: Composition as Conversation--and Vice Versa

The ideas in this lecture felt almost architectural, perhaps because a throughline for me was the word "composition" and the notion of "rooms within rooms." Those rooms within rooms feel as though they operate on both the emotional and gut level, but also in terms of form/structure, the words we use, and what matter (letters and definitions) composes them. I also felt Heather was asking us not to simply consider the placement of and use of our words, but what our sympathies mean for the way we read and the way we compose, what are we and our work in conversation with? (This was illustrated in the different readings of Seidel, in particular.) As a fiction writer, I also felt there was a question of tone lingering for me here, perhaps because I see atmosphere as an element in those rooms within rooms. And, as I investigate those spaces, the lecture encouraged us to not take anything at face value, but to continue interrogating.

The lecture reminded me of a conversation I'd had with Joan Aleshire near the beginning of the residency. We were talking about translation and the way in which such close attention to the words—their history, meaning, and the cultural context surrounding them—draw us to be similarly attentive and questioning regarding the composition of our own work. I haven't done any work in translation, really, but it reminded me of my love for Camus and that I might return to one of his texts (perhaps one of the novels, plays, or the creative nonfiction) and try to tease it out and then see, perhaps through my working journal or revision, the ways in which the rhythm of that attention and work begin to inform my own pieces. The lecture also raised for me, perhaps particularly because of Seidel, questions about the extrinsic forces my work is in conversation with. More and more, I feel my work in conversation with the present, historical moment, whereas it was previously in conversation with a much earlier, imagined time. Not that this is good or bad; I'm just noticing.

Here's what I think about Heather's method of presentation: I just want to shrink myself to the size of say, a lentil, and hang out in Heather's brain. Of course, I would need permission, but I find her thinking so generous, so dynamic, deliciously associative, and playful that I just want to listen to her speak and track those thoughts and ideas. I admire her method of presenting, her willingness to amend and explore as she goes along. It was a wonderful lecture.

## HEATHER McHUGH: Composition as Conversation--and Vice Versa

I was very much captured by Heather's lead-in, the story of her mother saying something that provoked her father to throw his dinner against the wall and storm out, leaving her mother "seething and weeping" as she went for the broom. And the little girl going to her room, knowing that conversation was a "tort waiting to happen" but reacting by teasing language apart, turning words around and upside down as if looking for a different code or meaning.

For me this connected to the previous lecture about "the request." A comment of Charles Baxter's made me think that families enact both overt and covert requests – there are requests that children internalize, maybe as a life mission, without the request ever having been made explicit. In my family, trying to get my father to speak at all – "to open up"—was a life mission. Maybe a lot of our poems (my poems, others') are responding to the requests that we believe were made of us, that stuck with us even when we thought we had refused them.

Heather quoted Yeats: "Poetry is the argument we have with ourselves." It is a consequence of our not knowing what we mean, our never finally knowing – but finding sometimes that we seem to mean the opposite of what we first said, or we may mean both the statement and its opposite or a number of other variations. She spoke of "intertransitivities" – as the exchange, I think, between individuals (or poet and reader) of what we think we think, what we see, what we feel or believe we feel. Or the same exchange occurring within different parts or levels of ourselves. This lecture was networked with paradoxes, false leads, dizzying word play, sharp turns, maybe somewhat like the way we think about what we believe we know.

Listening to Heather's lectures are like running a rapid: the prose assertions that connect the poems she has chosen are the whitewater, full of puns and complicated syntax, often featuring vocabulary that deserves to be taken slowly, yet delivered so fast that there's little or no time to digest. If you write down a phrase of hers, you miss the next two sentences. When she gets to the poems, however, we've dropped into a pool and can stop and savor the verse, see how it illustrates what (as best we can discern) she's been saying. I see how some of these poems were cannily paired – Amichai's focus on a bomb's destruction versus Holub's poem about rebuilding and "pardon" after the explosion. The interplay of "I" and "you" in the Seidel, the Gluck, the Montale poems, an exploration of the theme of conversation. And Rilke's "The Beggars" has a "you," a "he," and a "they" (the beggars), and the poem's verbs (as Heather pointed out) seem bidirectional, applying either to the observers or to the lepers being observed, as if "melting" were literally happening to the two (or three) sides of this street interaction. For me, this connects with the bidirectional transformation (between images) that occurs in Mandelstam's poems, as in "Persephone's Bees," which I annotated for bookshop.

One more quote for me to remember: Poetry is "the music of a writer's resistance to her own most facile notions." This ongoing resistance is evidently what makes it take so long and demands so much revision, re-seeing, restarting.

## DEBRA SPARK: Can I Have Some Information, Please?

I feel a need to start by saying that Debra's lectures are stunning. Both this lecture and the lecture on humor last July have been highlights not only of those residencies but of all the residencies I've attended. Her delivery is warm and funny, and she structures her lectures so artfully. Moreover, I feel like she picks topics that raise questions essential to our work. Not that other material is non-essential, but the questions she invites us to consider change from interesting to urgent by the end of her lectures.

I was particularly interested in this topic because I feel like I've been faking it a little bit regarding some details in my stories. These details often involve the work world or cultural markers that I have intuited my way into and yet I wouldn't be surprised to be called out on any of them. And, I've been slowly working my way toward a project in literary nonfiction that will require significant research to pull off. I'm raiding my own larder on this project, and yet I also have to raid others' if I want it to reach its potential. And so the questions about when to research, how much, and at what point were particularly helpful. In my own work, I think I can usually get started, mark out the story, without having to hit the library. But then, I try to get more information. Last semester, I drove to a small, obscure town about three hours from home just so I could see it and get a sense of the place. Thirty minutes spent driving around the gas station and this very, very small town might not sound like much, but all of the sensory information gathered on the drive and in the town was invaluable. I find outside resources refresh my imagination, and my interest in setting is helped by research about the kinds of plants in an area, names for wind, and so forth. As someone who is introverted and a bit shy, I also find it gives me access to another world until I'm daring enough to start asking people questions, venture out on my own, etc.

The idea of doing just enough to create a "passable illusion" struck me, as did the reminder to not allow research be a placeholder for the writing. The emphasis seems to be on using research to create atmosphere, not banging in interesting, but unnecessary details with a sledgehammer.

## FACULTY CLASSES

### ELLEN BRYANT VOIGT: Double-Double

- Irony works to reveal, not conceal.
- Context informs tone.
- One can resist ironic style without rejecting irony.
- Irony is less double talk than double vision—a double vision that stems not from lack of meaning but from excess meaning.

I hadn't considered irony's ability to reveal before. Setting up a contrast between ironic style, irony, and cultural irony helped illuminate the role irony can play in poetry. In every workshop this week, I found myself relying on the language of "existential" or "empirical" irony to help define the moments that exploited the intentional discrepancies between what is the case and what seemed to be the case—often times having trouble determining the former. I assume most of the work I read uses some breed of existential irony to ratchet up the dramatic tension of the piece. I can't help but think of Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" and a brief anecdote from high school. My senior English teacher read the poem aloud and asked us to summarize the work. A violinist in the school orchestra said, "This poem's about a man coming home from work and his son just loving the time he gets to spend with him." A fullback on the high school football team said, "This poem's about child abuse. The father's violent with the kid, and the whole thing makes me uncomfortable." I remember liking poetry a lot more when my teacher told the fullback he was absolutely incorrect. "There's no way you can read the poem that way," she said. That's when I knew there was a certain slipperiness to poetry, a slipperiness that asserts itself through existential irony. In my own writing, I hope to take a closer look at what is concretely going on and what seems to be going on as an undercurrent. I hope using irony as a lens/critical tool will help me achieve a better knack for narrative clarity, as it seems existential irony is impossible without a clear idea of a work's context and narrative.

## ELLEN BRYANT VOIGT. Double-Double.

We started from this idea: "Irony found in literature exploits an intentional discrepancy between what seems to be the case and what is the case." Ellen introduced a new category of Irony: "Empirical" Irony. In the poems we discussed, empirical irony comes not from meaninglessness, but from an abundance of meaning in the world, sometimes contradictory meaning, yet truly co-existent. All of the poems we read seem like a linear movement towards more sincerity—or immersion in sincere meaning. As in this lecture, I find it especially useful when lectures start from where the previous lectures ended. I find useful the return to the dichotomy between irony and sarcasm: "sarcasm is a subset of mockery, it sets out to sneer... irony does not." Also useful is the return to discussion of context, the necessity of "a fixed-point" from which to measure irony, such as the example of the Vermont postmaster in the middle of winter saying isn't it warm out. In a poem there must be context to have the irony mean anything. There is the question: "how to distinguish between conscious and unconscious naïveté?" "Neither out far nor in deep"... is an example of how the casual 3<sup>rd</sup> person speaker from the opening ("people along the sand/ All turn and look one way...") transforms into a dual meaning by the final stanza: "They cannot look out far./ They cannot look in deep./ But when was that ever a bar/ To any watch they keep?" The voice of sincerity in the last two lines is essential in this poem. Dickinson's # 67, is similar in that the paradox is immediately apparent in the first stanza: "Success is counted sweetest/ By those who ne'er succeed," and the lines proceed with hyperbole, but the heightened pitch of the final stanza casts a different light on what came before; the last lines "revise our notion of where is the ground... what is hyperbolic;" they are "charged with feeling," and we feel "that we have arrived at a true expression of feeling... past doublings of verbal irony." These lines don't contradict everything that has come before—they take it to a new pitch: they do "not contradict generalized meaning of success... also universal distorting influence of envy..." Thus, in both #67 and "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" there seems to be a progression towards encompassing sincerity, as a heightened embracing of paradox. Gluck's poem "Walking at Night" moves from more ambiguity towards a more sincere, insistent assertion of the narrator's voice: "nights are free"... the poem opens with an ambiguous tone. But gradually this ambiguous tone is infused with more investment of the speaker; one line that invests the speaker more is the address: "when you look at a body"—implying the speaker and everyone else in the "she" who is walking. By the final stanza, the speaker is "no longer witness but inhabits her experience" "she feels two things, contradictory, both true." She is both young and old. I found the Frost poem particularly illuminating: "For Once, Then, Something." This is a perfect poem for this lecture... despite skepticism, there is sincerity too, and the "aim is not to conceal... but to reveal"... that our state is just like that of this speaker. Did he see anything in the water or didn't he? Wonderful lecture.

## LAN SAMANTHA CHANG: Elements of Pacing

It's always refreshing (and heartening) to hear faculty members confess to areas that they consider to be weaknesses in their own work, so I was immediately interested in Sam's class today because she was addressing one of her own. Sam's definition of dramatic pacing was comprised of four elements: decision, discovery, deed, and accident; she used several examples to illustrate how these elements work.

Most helpful of the examples, for me, were the two versions of Raymond Carver's story ("The Bath" and "A Small, Good Thing.") Not only was it interesting to compare these two stories (which are essentially the same) side by side (and, indeed, to hear Sam's statistic about word count and action per 100 words), but it gave me a unique experience of feeling as if I were in disagreement with the majority of the other students who were raising their hands, offering opinions of the stories. While most of the people who offered their opinions of Carver's two versions expressed that they thought the second one was "better," I much preferred the first and was not persuaded by their arguments. I think this is noteworthy because in an earlier semester, I would probably have reconsidered my stance based on the popularity of the other opinion. But now that I've been here longer, I'm realizing that it's okay to have a unique perspective about such things and that the program fosters such differences in opinion. I could recognize in such a moment that my confidence as a reader and a writer really has grown, and that was a certainly a great way to kick off the semester.

Using Elizabeth Bowen's analogy of the taut string, Sam pointed out that the tautness, which is the pace, is a personal preference and that how taut your string is, or how quick the pacing, is less important than how consistent it is. She went on to say that we should pick the pace that we want for our work at the outset and stick to it all the way through. "Bullet in the Brain" was the perfect example to illustrate this point. At first glance, time seems to move drastically in the latter half of the story, but Sam pointed out that time and pace are not necessarily the same thing and that Wolff still honors the pace of the story, even when time is moving differently. I don't think I would have ever thought of time and pace as moving independently from each other before this class. Now, while revising with an eye toward pacing, I will be able to look at each as its own unique element to explore and address.

## MATTHEW OLZMANN: Imaginary Lives

The running joke in my house is, “Mom’s not here right now,” said in front of or around me because of how frequently I zone out. I’ve been this way since I was a child, living in my secret world, building my secret life. When I was a teenager, my father, frustrated by how distant I seemed all the time, broke into my diary. I never forgave him for that, and for a year before he passed away, we barely spoke to each other. I invoke my father often in my poems, perhaps as a way of making up for those conversations that we should have, but never had. And part of recklessness as a young adult, then as adult, often has to do with an intense fear of regret, because in fact, regret is something that never leaves me.

Olzmann’s lecture resonated deeply with me, particularly the Steve Dunn quote he read at the end, about our secret life being the fire in a clearing, the one thing we must protect at all costs when everything else has been taken: events by imaginary characters (selves) we are imagining, the room within the room. Olzmann argues that the imaginary and reality have a symbiotic relationship that intensify each other. Without each other, they swerve into meaninglessness. Imagination is distinct from memory in that it can forecast what hasn’t actually happened; it’s a specific kind of interiority that exists in disjunction with what our senses can or have perceived. Many feelings are not possible without imagination taking place – thoughts about what could happen (i.e. counter-factual events) – inform and shape emotions. This makes me think of American hyper-nationalism and rage whipped by fake news, but the danger is when the imagined is taken as fact, rather than its tension with reality. When we are able to recognize the gap between what’s real and what’s not, a whole range of human emotions become available to us – regret, hope, emotions that hinge on a sense of the conditional and possibility. Perhaps imagination is inherently ironic? Without it, all we have is propaganda, i.e. prescribed feeling. Olzmann discusses how speculation works in Levine’s “Dog Poem,” longing in Kono’s “Homeless,” interrogatives in Thomas Lux’s “I Love You Sweatheart,” and the thing between the lover and the beloved in Nicole Sealey’s “Object Permanence,” paradox in Cohen’s, “The Committee Weighs In.”

I’m thinking now about that secret life, and how last semester, Connie kept trying to get me to reveal my interiority more directly. She actually recommended me for an AWP panel specifically about poets who refuse to say things. But I am thinking about how secrets lose their power, their thrall, when they are exposed. Which images I am willing to share, and which I am not, because to be seen is also to be subjected to someone else’s gaze, expectations, punishments. There is a kind of safety in remaining other, illegible and I think in many ways the primary instinct in my poems is to offer protection. Image after image patched together into a shield, in the way that beauty can act as armor. Olzmann’s lecture made me think about how I am selecting the images I draw out of my interiority, which imagined lives I am willing to throw on the page and why.

## Alan Shapiro: Mark Twain and the Ambiguities of Expertise

Alan Shapiro began his class with a rumination on his relationship with J. V. Cunningham, who drew a sharp distinction between “verse” as a laudable and professional pursuit and “poetry” which he disdained for its sentimentality and “amateurish” spirituality. This provoked a meditation on the usefulness (or lackthereof) of such a binary. To poorly paraphrase Alan: If you teach poetry, you can’t help see poetry in some ways as Cunningham did—a practice with rules and conventions that can be discussed and contested and revised. Implicit in creative writing as a course of study is the assumption that writing is a willed activity, something we choose to do, and will do more successfully the more informed we become of the traditions we traffic in and utilize. And yet “we often speak in terms of necessity, not choice... submission to impulse more than rational control... we invoke the muse or the unconscious... as a source of power... when it’s really good it isn’t really under our control, it overcomes what we think our intentions are with intentions of its own... we say that bad poems are bad partly because they don’t draw energy from anything more than mere consciousness... how often in settings like this one have you seen a poet or fiction writer extoll the virtues of not knowing as a way of getting closer to [the core of the work]... we rank the intensely organic higher than the mechanical.” As Alan concluded, we create, ultimately, a false dichotomy between rational mind and feeling heart, between two parts of a whole.

Alan then pivoted to Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi*, which he sees as a sort of treatise on the question of mastery—the journey of the pilot and his education in the book mimics the journey of the poet. Alan explored the dichotomy between “trained and untrained vision,” the eye that can see the mechanics and implications of the river’s rushing, and the eye that sees only its aesthetics and scenery. In a passage from the novel, Twain demonstrates how the trained eye of the steamboat pilot removes the wonderment of the natural world from view, replaced with utility and concern. The pilot’s trained eye, reflected in the language itself, “invoke[s] not objects but relationships among objects.” As Alan then put it, mastery of this nature, taken to its natural extreme, can become detrimental. “The surgery was a success but that patient died.” We risk losing our sense of wonder and passion in the service of pure mechanics, pure intellect. I’m just going to quote Alan at length now, because it’s too elegantly put. “Mastery isn’t a fixed state... it isn’t methodical or algorithmic, it can’t be put on automatic pilot... The kind expertise that life on the Mississippi embodies is a state of perpetual testing, or perpetual readiness... because the landscape of language, art and life, is never fixed. What you learn today, you may need to unlearn tomorrow, or relearn in a different way to [remain] responsive and flexible.”

As usual, Alan’s lecture was stirring and heartfelt. His talks are always a highlight, balancing (and the irony of this is not lost on me, given this particular talk) heart and head, the minutiae (even excitement) of craft with the larger purpose of our emotional urgencies.



## Marisa Silver: The Noticing Eye/I

This lecture was a beautiful and brilliant examination of a writer's need to notice, and for how that noticing can be applied to both the narration of a story, as well as to its characters. What do we notice as writers and why? What are the underlying and subconscious reasons we see what we see? And what does that tell us about where we should look for places of emotional significance and interest? Using the example of a woman she met standing in line at a Michael's, Silver examines all the levels of noticing that took place as she began to hear the woman's story about her son's pregnant girlfriend.

The things a character notices can serve to develop and complicate a character. It can also inform and contribute to the thematic goals of the work. In many ways this lecture related to the one that came before it, Dana Levin's, in that Silver argues that we are not omniscient individuals. Rather, we see through highly charged lenses. That, in fact, creation is an existential act. A work of art is an illusion, but if you heighten the illusory act, the art becomes more true to reality—a fleshy complexity.

In Baldwin's story "Sonny's Blues" we see a vivid example of how this art, this illusory act of rendering a character's way of seeing, can bring us nearer to understanding a character's reality. Through the rhythm of Baldwin's prose we see a shift occurring in his narrator, his own subjectivity beginning to change, to become more musical, as thus closer to the subjectivity of his brother. At the end the music allows the narrator to finally step out of himself and into the spiritual and narcotic aspects of art and drugs and self-forgetfulness—all the things he could not understand about his brother.

In my own work this could not be more relevant. I'm striving to establish a reality as its seen through the eyes of my narrator, who happens to be a musician. I want the reader to begin to understand the deeper spiritual wants and needs—his specific way of seeing—and how that effects his decisions, his choices, and shows, ultimately why he ends up where he does.

## **PETER TURCHI: Don't Stand So Close To Me (or Him, or Her)**

In his lecture, Turchi offers a taxonomy of narrative distance, the many types of relation between reader and narrator. Turchi is most interested in first-person narrators that have a dynamic relationship with the reader. Authorial authority, he argues, is predicated on threading the needle of narrative distance: the ability to make sure the reader knows the narrative is distasteful, say, though the author is not.

Those that tell stories are not invisible; in fact, they are unwittingly telling their own stories all the time, though maybe not the one they intended and it is crucial that the unintended story (some feature of the author he/she is not in control of) doesn't overwhelm the telling of the story itself. This lecture brought to mind a quote by Claudia Rankine in her Paris Review interview about how her poetry is not interested in the stories people tell, but the story beneath the story:

I'm often listening not for what is being told to me but for what resides behind the narrative. What is the feeling for the thing that's being told to me?... Often when people are speaking with me, I feel what they are saying is the journey to how they are feeling. I mean, it's not that I'm not interested in what they're saying, but I feel like what they're saying is a performance. In many conversations I realize that the thing that's being said is really not the point at all, there's this subterranean exchange of contexts, emotions, and unspoken signals.

The question for me then becomes: how to get closer to the subterranean, the hidden but central place that motivates the story? If we are aware of our narrative's tendency to dance around its central concern, unbeknownst to us, we can have a better idea of our blindspots and, by extension, our story's blindspots.

## **Gabrielle Calvocoressi: So Tired. Keep Going: Fatigue, Boredom, and the Luminous Moment**

Gaby arrived at her class topic—"poems of great density"—by way of her long study of the Black Mountain poets: after a time, she began asking herself how Black Mountain has helped her think about poetics, experiment, and chaos today. She began thinking about duration—about how Black Mountain poets stuck with their vision, how any artist persists at their work, and she wondered about fatigue, about why and how we keep going—in our work as artists, and in reading and writing poems of density, length, and digression. She asked herself: How can a feeling of fatigue or wanting to leave a poem be generative? How can fatigue, duress, and frustration create opportunity? When we read poems of great density and/or length, what keeps our attention? What keeps us going?

To begin our exploration of these questions, Gaby cited Jorie Graham, who claims: "Eliot is an example of someone who says, in *The Waste Land*, 'suspend the desires of the conceptual intellect—the desire to know who's speaking, where you are, what they're about—and read with your ear, read with your body.'

If you're not reading with the part that's asking for a confession, but with your ability to associate, your intuition, your sense that this moves by analogy to that...then you have no problem, because you're not asking a poem to be a single individual narrative telling you about a life."

Robyn Schiff is a poet Gaby sees following in the Black Mountain poets' tradition of experimentation, and whose work often requires readers to 'suspend the desires of [their] conceptual intellect.' Her poem "Houselights" is a concentric, multi-layered, and digressive piece, in which she takes up issues of privilege, imperialism, 9/11 and other tragedies, as well as the history of entertainment and commercialism. Throughout the poem, she continually circles back to Sputnik, Macbeth, anecdotes and history of the theater, the idea of entertainment, and 9/11, interspersing these kind of "satellite moments" with her own experience or meditative thoughts. While the poem might seem at times to recklessly or wildly expand, ragged lines and frequent enjambment fueling a sense of anticipation, it is tightly structured by those previously-mentioned anchoring/satellite moments. When I felt myself fatiguing or losing patience with the poem, I found that Schiff very soon afterward circled back to one of those satellite issues. Often, too, she interrupts abstract/cerebral passages with more straightforward, tangible personal anecdotes that offered opportunity to stabilize and breathe. For me, this was key in working through the poem's exhaustion: I think readers need breathing and seeing room, points of recovery.

Another thing that impressed me about the poem was how, even as Schiff made rhetorical efforts to keep the reader at a distance with lines like "I will probably not entertain you," the density of the poem's personal detail and thinking still created a sense of intimacy. I felt myself inside Schiff's mind and heart, and I wanted to spend a long time there. I confess that I was entertained by her dramatics, digressions and linear suspensions. I was moved by the depth, detail, and density of her thinking and experience.

As always, Gaby led a compassionate, robust, and revelatory discussion. She motivated me to push my poems harder, to risk "adjacency" (which I think I'm finally beginning to do slightly better, particularly, I hope in one of my worksheet poems), to stay open to veering from the straightforward course.