



*About
the
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Connections: On the Artist, the Work, and the Audience



Toni Libro

A fusion between the person and the world is often reported as an observable fact in creativeness, according to noted psychologist Abraham Maslow. I believe that a fusion between the audience and the artwork must occur as well; that is, we must find ways to connect with the works of art we value if we are to experience them as fully as possible. As teachers, we must help our students find ways to identify with the works to which we lead them, even when these works seem remote and inaccessible. This essay is about some of those attempts at fusion, and some of the questions raised by the work and its relationship to the audience.

Assessing Our Relationship to the Work

In an Introduction to the Humanities course, we were reading the poems of Emily Dickinson. I think it is fair to say that students were mystified by her poetry—puzzled by her language, her syntax, and her voice. Of course, this is to be expected; Emily Dickinson challenges everyone, and part of her enduring appeal is the depths she is able to plumb. Nevertheless, I wanted very much to move the students closer to Emily Dickinson's work so that they could be "touched"

by her. I will be using the metaphor of movement—moving “closer” to the work, being “touched” by the work—to illustrate the degree to which we experience a work of art. When the course began, students were quite distanced from her work. A graphic example of just how far was to be found in a little exercise similar to a semantic differential that I asked students to enter into their journals. This exercise consists of students drawing a figure, usually a stick figure, and positioning it at some point in relation to the work at hand, thus indicating how “close” or “far” they felt from the work. I suggested that seldom if ever does the figure actually superimpose upon the work, indicating we are “one” with it, but that we aspire to this “oneness” when we are truly enamored of a particular work of art. Needless to say, when we first started to read Emily Dickinson, students positioned their figures very far from the work at hand, some nearly off the page! What could we do to move the figures closer to the work, in this particular instance, closer to the poems of Emily Dickinson?

Moving toward the Work: Early Connections

First, we read her poems. Aloud, several times, in class. Poems must get up off the page before we can begin to hear them. Students were asked to read selected poems at home as well, to themselves and to others. Students were then asked to pick a poem “of their own.” This became “their poem.” They were to read this poem to the class, and lead a discussion of the poem, since they were “closer” to it than their classmates. This approach helped the students to take the initiative in appreciating a small part of Dickinson’s work. Still, there were many questions and not always a lot of answers, which is, perhaps, how a college classroom ought to be, and certainly how a classroom reading Emily Dickinson will be.

Slowly students began to tease out the themes Emily Dickinson wrote so much about: success and failure, domesticity and nature, grief and loss, life and death, time and eternity.

They began to see that these universal aspects of her work speak to us all. But there was more to do before the stick figures budged from their places in the students' journals.

The Role of the Journal

The journal was to serve as a sort of "extension" of class discussion. But there were times when I gave them a "focused entry," meaning an entry on a particular question or subject. One of the focused entries after a few class periods with Dickinson's work was to write a letter to the poet, speaking directly to her in their own voice, just as if they were writing to a friend or relative. My strategic hope with this assignment was to move them closer to the artist and her work, but even I was surprised by the degree of intimacy they brought to the assignment. Perhaps there is something about the "Dear Emily" approach that breaks down walls or barriers between people, even when the person is as formidable as Emily Dickinson, but whatever the reason, students were remarkably candid and felt free enough to open up and tell her what they liked and didn't like, what they understood and didn't understand, how angry they became when they couldn't understand, and most especially, what they could identify with—similar experiences, feelings, memories. Here is where students found an outlet for emotions which might have otherwise remained buried, and here is where they began to see how these similar experiences could be transformed by poetic genius into works of art. They could begin to appreciate the power of language to express the truth of the human experience or, as poet Adrienne Rich says, "the power of our ultimate relationship to everything in the universe."

Dramatizations: Bringing Works "to Life"

We went so far as to bring "Miss Emily" into class one day, taking advantage of a dramatic presentation by a local impersonator, who swept into the classroom in full Dickinson regalia, stopped in her tracks and exclaimed to the class,

“Why, what are you doing here in my house? Does Vinnie [Dickinson’s sister] know you’re here?” And so began about an hour’s dialogue with “Emily” herself, breaking down more barriers that distance us from the creator, and emphasizing the human nature of the artist, as she talked about her brothers and sisters, wishes and dreams, disappointments and successes. Of course, this kind of dramatic presentation is not always possible, but it helps to be alert to the fact that sometimes it is. Also, it is possible today to bring in performances on video tapes; the one-woman show about Emily Dickinson, *The Belle of Amherst*, for instance, in whole or part, can be effective in stimulating thought and discussion.

The Value of Memorization

Call me a traditionalist, but I also insist on memorization of at least a few lines, preferably a whole poem, as what I tend to call a “gift” to students from Dickinson. They may then “own” the poem for the rest of their lives, and will come to understand it as they grow and come to understand more about life. I tell them about a college professor of mine who had students in his Shakespeare class memorize a half dozen of Shakespeare’s best sonnets and write each out for the final exam, down to the last punctuation mark. As a result, I can, to this day, recite entire sonnets, but more than that, I can see how much closer to them I have moved over time. Students must understand that works of art, whether poems or paintings, endure with us over time, changing as we change, growing as we grow. We do not encounter these works like yesterday’s newspaper, something to read and discard (not that there aren’t items of value in newspapers; I am forever clipping and saving), but rather we return to the greatest works over a lifetime, to be nourished, refreshed and inspired by them.

Imitation: Experiments in Style

Students also can write their own poems, in the style of Emily Dickinson, to better appreciate what that elusive term

“style” means. Here they can apply what they have learned about prosody: line length, rhyme, and rhythms. Or, they can just write a poem “inspired” by Dickinson, one that, for whatever reason, evokes some aspect of her world, however tangentially. The important thing is the creation of a poem as an object of their own, a concrete expression of their own sensibility, a poem which could not have existed in quite the same way before this experience. Students may “surprise” themselves, not thinking they could ever “write a poem,” but finding that, given the opportunity, there was no reason why they couldn’t. For some, this will be the first poem ever written; imagine, all those years in school, reading the works of others, but never finding it possible to write oneself, naturally, the way one walks and talks each day—to recognize and acknowledge one’s own interior power. Wittgenstein’s “The limits of my language are the limits of my world” is all too true; students’ worlds remain entirely too small without the liberating effects of finding their voice on the page in the form of a poem.

The Question of Gender

Another mode of inquiry which may yield profitable results as well as bring students closer to the work at hand is the question of gender. For instance, in the study of Emily Dickinson, it is appropriate to acknowledge that Dickinson found it possible to write, though a woman, in repressive mid-nineteenth century New England. As Adrienne Rich says in her illuminating essay “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson”: “Emily Dickinson—struck me as a practical woman, exercising her gift as she had to, making choices. I have come to imagine her as somehow too strong for her environment, a figure of powerful will, not at all frail or breathless, someone whose personal dimensions would be felt in a household.” Rich’s perception dispels some of the stereotypes surrounding Emily Dickinson, distortions which threaten to dismiss Dickinson and her *œuvre* simply by not taking her seriously; I am speaking of that tendency to re-

duce the woman to a scribbling eccentric who dressed all in white and never left her home. Though she was indeed eccentric, and she wore white increasingly toward the end of her life, and seldom ventured far from home (this last not necessarily unusual), she was much more; her poems ranged far and wide, from the playful to the most profound ever written.

Tillie Olson tells us in *Silences*, a book about the relationship of circumstances to the creation of literature, including class, color, sex and the times or climate into which one is born: "for every one who writes, we must realize the invisible, the as-innately capable: the born to the wrong circumstances, diminished, excluded, foundered, silenced." She reminds us that every woman who writes is a survivor, and that "in our century, writers who are women are one out of twelve." One out of twelve! And even that one out of twelve is still in danger of being devalued, neglected, or omitted. Such are the politics of writing. That Emily Dickinson the writer exists at all is a triumph of creativity; her literary legacy won out over the odds of constricting circumstances and sexual oppression. It is her courage and complexity as a woman and her power as a writer that the question of gender in relation to her work helps to illuminate.

Et Tu: *The Instructor and the Assignment*

If the sensitivity to sex or circumstance helps students to appreciate a particular writer's voice, it may help them to appreciate the process involved as well. All too often students assume that works are somehow divine, that they spring fully and perfectly to life and effortlessly find their way to the page. The very process of writing is a mystery to them. They feel, perhaps, that if they have to "do it over" they did not "do it right" in the first place, and get discouraged. It is so important to make clear that writing is hard work, that writing is, in fact, rewriting.

One way to help students appreciate the value of revision is to let them know, when we are able, how writers they par-

ticularly admire developed their works. Annie Dillard's book, *The Writing Life*, is full of such examples, including her own passionate processes: "Who will teach me to write?...The page, which you cover slowly with the crabbed thread of your gut; the page in the purity of its possibilities, the page of your death, against which you pit such flawed excellences as you can muster with all your life's strength: that page will teach you to write."

We can share our intellectual or artistic life more generously with our students. Let them in on our thinking. Let them know how many drafts it took to get the article just right or the poem finished. ("Poems are never finished; only abandoned in despair..." I remember the famous quote, chagrined, even as I write this.) A colleague once told me that she carted boxes of her manuscript to class so students could see the raw evidence—right there before them—the rough-and-tumble world of creation. The students were awed.

Finally, if students have to write, we should write with them! Chances are they will be fascinated to know that their instructor needed several drafts to get something to work well. And they will be in on the best-kept secret of all: how the writing process works—what Robert Frost once called, "the pleasure of taking pains."

Full Circle: From One Work to Another

My assignment for my students turned into a surprising project for myself: a series of poems inspired by or related to women writers. My intent was to write back ("This is my letter to the world/that never wrote to me..." Dickinson) to writers I felt close to, and Emily Dickinson was one of those writers. I began writing, allowing the connections to her work to surface as they might. I found a few central images that formed a poem which eventually settled itself into nine three-line stanzas.

The poem is called, simply, "For Emily Dickinson," and it goes like this:

Your circuitous success
survived the efforts of
the scholars, editors, et al—

to fix your fractured rhymes
your peculiar syntax
and your perverse punctuation.

Cryptic notes and puzzle
pieces to family and friends—
recurrent images of bee and bobolink

mountains, valleys
sea and sun—
lead you deeper

into that volcanic arsenal
where wild fires rage
and a loaded gun waits

and you fire
at time's jewels
morning, noon and night

recreating, like a refracting
telescope, luminous
moments

where
Hope is a song
Eden a sea

and Death
a carriage called
Eternity.

I had the feeling that I had moved very close to Emily Dickinson during the writing of this poem. I do not know

anything beyond that. But what I do know is that the sensation of writing is pleasurable; that if I can convey something of that pleasure to my students, they may be as eager as I am to take up the challenge, and in so doing, find their imaginations waiting for them.

I should also add that the stick figures did budge from their places in the students' journals, some more than others. One student went so far as to move her figure quite close to Dickinson's work, her stick figure's outstretched forefinger reaching out, almost but not quite touching the work of Dickinson. Even a lowly stick figure in this particular pose had the power to remind me of Michelangelo's celebrated ceiling fresco in the Sistine Chapel—the *Creation of Man*.

I thought how accurate the student's graphic was, how symbolic of our relationship to the arts. After all, when we allow ourselves to move close enough to be touched by works of art, we do, indeed, create ourselves anew.