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The Seven Deadly Virtues

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Cover Page Footnote

Lynn Z. Bloom is Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor and holder of the Aetna Chair of Writing at the University of Connecticut. Her current writing and teaching focus on autobiography and essays, as in "The Essay Canon" (article 1999, book forthcoming) and "Living to Tell the Tale: The Complicated Ethics of Creative Nonfiction" (2003).

The Seven Deadly Virtues

Lynn Z. Bloom

Everywhere I go I'm asked if I think the university stifles writers. My opinion is that they don't stifle enough of them. There's many a bestseller that could have been prevented by a good teacher.

—Flannery O'Connor

Cry Me a River: Academic Virtue in Action

It is my first quarter of doctoral work at Ohio State, and as a Michigan snob I am taking the hardest courses on the books from professors known as the denizens of Murderers' Row. These are truly killer courses. The seminars meet every day, five unremitting days a week for two hours, and every night each course (I am taking two) requires three to five hours' preparation. It is also my first quarter of teaching. The only advice proffered in 1958 on how to teach freshman composition is "Have the students"—there are twenty-five in each of my two sections—"write something every class period." What they write, I have to comment on. Accustomed to the more generous rhythm of the semester system, afraid of flunking out, I struggle to keep on schedule. One misstep and I will fall into the abyss of no return.

And then, halfway through the ten-week quarter, I realize I have an unworkable term paper topic in one course and have to begin anew. In the other seminar we have a critical paper due every week; I can stay on keel if I have a one-day extension on one of these. "More time," I plead with the instructor, a savant who publishes a book a year, on our way to class, "just this once?" "No!" he says, elaborating emphatically, "Punctiliousness is a virtue, and in graduate school you must turn your work in on time. No exceptions." We enter the seminar room, the professor, seven male students, and myself, seated in my usual spot to the professor's left. Tears start to slide out from under my eyelids, whether from rage, fear, or frustration I do not know. I try to squeeze my eyes shut to hold them in, but to no avail. Splotches begin to appear on my notebook as I take notes.

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Soon the page buckles. I use up all my Kleenex, then the handkerchief a classmate smuggles me, but I cannot stop. I cry for the entire two hours; the instructor never looks at me. I turn in his paper on time, get an extension on the other one, and that night the lender of the handkerchief takes me for a long walk around campus and teaches me an entire lexicon of swear words I have never heard before, many of them anatomical impossibilities.

The Emperor of Ice Cream: The Primrose Path v the Straight and Narrow

Flannery O'Connor was more right than she realized. The university stifles most creative writers except the most intrepid—even reckless—the good along with the bad, in the process of teaching them to write according to the conventions of the academy in general and their specific disciplines in particular. That is the thesis of this essay. The more advanced the degree (except for the small percentage of English majors who land in graduate creative writing programs), the more firmly embedded does the student become in the literary conventions of the discipline of the major, anchored by the seven deadly virtues of academic life. These are, as I will explain below, duty, rationality, conformity/conventionality, efficiency, order, economy. And, oh yes, punctuality. In fact, the academy, like any other bureaucracy or large organizational system, can't run without these virtues. All are hallmarks of the conventional degrees in English literature that concentrate on literary criticism—the only game in town when I was in grad school.

But these very characteristics that make one a good academic (or a good bureaucrat or a good citizen) promise to stifle the creativity necessary to write novels, poetry, drama, and creative nonfiction of quality, the primary texts that give critics something to write about. To produce a critical article or book chapter, literary criticism generally proceeds by logical, rational means (allowing for the occasional but necessary Aha! insight) to produce a fairly prescriptive argumentative format. Whereas the critic starts with the subject text at hand (often buttressed by other theoretical and critical texts), the creative writer starts with the blank sheet of paper, which John Updike sees “as radiant, the sun rising in the morning,” moving by fits and starts through experimental combinations of mind and heart, insight and association, sound and rhythm and sense to produce writing that is both novel and valuable (qtd. in Flaherty B6-7). Innovation is a risky, messy, passionate, and uncertain process, accommodating the disorder and inefficiency of randomness and the necessary time out for reflection and revision. Though we could call these antitheses to the deadly virtues the “seven lively sins,” the count would be inexact.

It should be clear that for most people literary criticism is intellectually much easier than creative writing. Whereas creative writing sprawls over space and time, literary criticism is more compact, its process less variable, its outcome more predictable. Thus, as a more efficient, more manageable enterprise, criticism becomes the default choice of all but the boldest, most independent students. Indeed, if students are as timid as I was, even in graduate school (I finished my doctorate in English at Michigan, after the year's exile at Ohio State, and I always turned my papers in on time, no extensions, no incompletes) and long afterward, they will be brainwashed to collaborate with the very suppressors of their attempts at creative risk taking. They can't help it.

I use myself as a case in point, representative of all students who majored in

English because they loved to write, aspired to become Famous Authors, and who wimped out, and ended up instead as English professors. We have met these people as caricatures in Garrison Keillor's Professional Organization of English Majors, the overly polite, grammatically correct nerds who write vapid couplets and jejune stories and end up isolated and impecunious, working at McDonald's and hoping in vain for a publisher, any publisher, to recognize their uncertain talent. Like many, I had hopes of publishing novels or poetry, though what I was actually writing would today have been called creative nonfiction, at the time, a genre without a name, despite the work of distinguished essayists such as E.B. White, James Baldwin, and Virginia Woolf. Like Moliere's *Bourgeois Gentleman*, who was surprised to learn that he'd been speaking prose all his life, a label would have helped to legitimate what I considered a suspect, if not outlaw, activity.

I went to college to become a Great Writer. Of course there were other reasons; I wanted to get away from home and a boring boyfriend, in particular. I had the tools, a brand new Smith Corona portable typewriter and a dictionary. I had the will, for I had wanted to be a writer ever since I laid eyes on Dr. Seuss at the age of six. And I had the affirmation, for throughout twelve years of New Hampshire public schooling, there was plenty of corroboration that I was a good writer—teachers' accolades, editorship of the school literary magazine and paper (*The School Spirit*, what else?) and a plethora of writing prizes. I fully expected to emerge in four years with a B.A., well on my way to greatness, even though I didn't know what that meant or how to get there. That was what college would teach me.

So I took a creative writing course every semester—fiction, essays, drama—all from senior faculty with distinguished reputations, though they never read us what they wrote, as I have since begun to do with my own students, in judicious snatches. I expected them to be the hardest courses I was taking (eschewing slogans and gimmicks, I soon dropped the Advertising course as too easy and insubstantial), and they were indeed tough and exhilarating. There were no rules, formulas, or formats, just the messy process of experimentation—does it sound better this way? Or that? Is this character convincing? Does the setting suit the subject? Even more important, is it a good story? If so, why? Or why not? Toughest of all, why would readers care about this? So what?

In creative writing courses, and only in these courses and in philosophy of ethics, was my understanding of the world as I was coming to know it validated—through writing written (and read) as much from the heart as from the head. For creative writing courses honored the expressions of feeling, intuition, imagination, experimentation, the associative leaps and bounds. All other courses, irrespective of their discipline—English, history, biology, geology, statistics, economics, political science—proceeded by “logos, linearity, conjunction, formulation” (see Root 18), thereby offering a rational understanding even of the essence of an irrational universe. Understanding the logic was easy. So was translating it into the conventional, usually argumentative, academic paper in which I deliberately took issue with the conventional wisdom (including the teacher's), marching through Georgia with the thesis up front followed by several major points, each buttressed by evidence that led inevitably to a conclusion, reasonable, appropriate, and certain. It was a lot more fun to follow the meandering path of creative writing, and exhilarating to do the hard work of listening at the “deep heart's core” that reading Yeats was helping me to understand.

As we read our Works-in-Progress (how grand that sounded) in class, I was also paying careful, elaborately casual, attention to the other students. Was their writing better than mine? Worse? Those with distinctive and unusual talent—Marge Piercy and Anne Stevenson frightened me—were so good and so original, and I knew I was neither. Dressed in black turtlenecks and long flowing skirts, in contrast to my preppy plaids and Peter Pan collars, they looked like real writers. They behaved like real writers, too, I suspected, taking lovers instead of dating boys. They must have lived on cigarettes and black coffee. Their very presence kept the class on knife edge for fear of comparisons that would wither inept manuscripts to ash. That I wrote better than the rest of our ultimately forgettable classmates didn't matter; I was looking at world class.

I was also looking for hints from my professors. Could I make it as a writer? I never dared to ask outright. Although I earned As in every course, the only faculty member who explicitly urged me as an undergraduate to become a writer was my violin teacher—and he had never seen a syllable I wrote. Only my freshman English teacher encouraged me to enter the Hopwood contest, Michigan's prestigious writing competition endowed by the author of the Broadway smash hit of 1921, *Getting Gertie's Garter*, and open to students at all levels. Some sophisticates enrolled in the master's program just so they could compete for the thousands of dollars in Hopwood prizes, but, having lost at the freshman level with a sophomoric satire on my hometown, I never dared to submit any other work. The acerbic voice of my Inner Critic continually overrode the External Critics' esteem. For a number of those A grades were actually A pluses. The teachers' pencilled comments, "publish this," implied that I knew how to go about doing so. But in fact I hadn't a clue.

Moreover, in my junior year I won cash prizes in the *Mademoiselle* College Board Contest for both fiction and nonfiction—the only double prizewinner in this prestigious national contest immortalized by Sylvia Plath (a double prizewinner two years earlier) in delicious sendup in *The Bell Jar*. I paid more attention, however, to the fact that despite these awards I and I alone among the prizewinners was not invited to go to New York to serve as a guest editor. Gail Greene, another student in my fiction class, whose name morphed that semester to Gayle and then quickly to Gael, went instead, thereby filling what I surmised was Michigan's quota. As a stringer for the *Detroit Free Press*, she was surely more sophisticated than I, though I did not believe she was a better writer. Still smarting from the news of her win and my loss that had arrived in a cute pink envelope the hour before our class met, I offered congratulations, hoping she wouldn't notice the catch in my throat. "Yeah," she replied, looking out the window where the sun rose and set in the direction of the Hudson River rather than the Huron, "Well, thanks," the only three words she cast in my direction during the entire semester. My opinion notwithstanding, Greene clearly had the right stuff, serving thirty-four years as *New York Magazine's* restaurant critic, her celebrity abetted by the titillating *Blue Skies, No Candy*. Would a stint as *Mademoiselle* guest editor have provided the validation I sought as a writer and changed my life, as it may have done for Greene? It's impossible to know.

Ode to Duty: Academic Writing and the Seven Deadly Virtues

When I close my eyes, I can see the Steinberg cartoon in vivid colors, a sprightly little girl speaking in bright lines, arabesques, and curlicues that form

flowers and butterflies floating over her head. The bulky, bulbous man to whom she sends these expressions of joy replies, straight black lines slashing through the dancing colors. That man could be my father, Oswald Theodore Wilhelm Zimmerman (nickname of “Odd”), ever and always reminding me to do my duty: “If there is a conflict between what you want to do and what you ought to do, you *must* do what you ought to do!” When as a sophomore I first encountered Wordsworth’s “Ode to Duty”—beginning “Stern Daughter of the Voice of God!”—I automatically substituted “Odd” for the deity, immediately recognizing that it was my father who would apply “the rod/To check the erring, and reprove,” just as he had always done, in sarcasm and in scorn.

So here I will do my duty to my readers, just as I promised, and anatomize the characteristics of the seven deadly virtues and their influence on writers in the academy. Make no mistake. In bureaucratic contexts these qualities are genuine virtues, necessary to the efficient and economical running of the academy or any other budget or calendar-driven organization—and what establishment (including the family) is immune to these concerns? Nevertheless, these seven deadly virtues can combine to derail, if not to kill off entirely, the uncertain or duty-bound writer’s creativity, especially when confronted with the juggernaut of academic writing coming down and always coming down the track.

Duty

Duty is the umbrella deadly virtue, for it encompasses a moral obligation to practice several other deadly virtues in the course of meeting one’s responsibilities and the deadlines signaled by *Punctuality*. Among these significant aspects of *Duty* are the exercise of *Rationality*; *Conformity* to middle class morality; and *Conventionality*, adherence to the norms of one’s academic discipline, the latter two characteristics intertwined in academic writing. I am surprised to note, in *The American Heritage Dictionary* definition of duty, meanings 6a, “The work performed by a machine under specified conditions,” and 6b, “A measure of efficiency expressed as the amount of work done per unit of energy used.” In fact, if one construes the writer as a word-producing machine, the definition fits very well, and *Efficiency*, along with *Economy*, its corollary, may be regarded as other *Duties* of the writer.

Rationality

The academy purports to be nothing if not rational. The writer is supposed to sound rational, not emotional, and maintain professional distance from the subject, not allowing love, hate, enthusiasm, or other emotional reactions to the topic to bleed into the discussion. Thus the dutiful academic writer, whether student or faculty researcher, is constrained to write rationally—the work usually construed as argumentative writing, critical or otherwise, that is organized according to a logical plan and proceeds by a series of logical steps to a logical conclusion. As a consequence, even when talking about others’ creative writing, it is rare for the critic to incorporate creative segments—say narrative, dialogue, or poetry—in a critical piece, let alone to write the entire piece in a creative mode. To do so might—*quelle horreur*—signal the operation of a host of non-rational elements, including imagination, passion, and play instead of the dead seriousness that dominates academic discourse—even when to use these elements would indicate that the writer understands the work at hand from an insider’s perspective.

Some editorial policies expressly forbid creative writing in critical

dissertations or journals; others discourage it. A few journals, such as *College English* and *College Composition and Communication*, in the past decade have on rare occasions allowed authors (such as Nancy Sommers, the late Wendy Bishop, and—dare I say—myself) to tell true stories or to write hybrids of creative nonfiction and analytic writing. As a formal acknowledgment that there are valid ways beyond the rational of making, understanding, and transmitting knowledge, a decade ago *JAEPL*, the *Journal for the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*, was established to provide a forum that—through encouraging explorations of “aesthetic, emotional, and moral intelligence; archetypes; body wisdom . . . silence; spirituality; and visualization”—would extend “the frontiers of teaching and learning beyond traditional disciplines and methodologies” based on rationality and order (ii). This journal, sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English, manifests a number of the values and ideals validated by current research in positive psychology and discussed in recent issues (January 2000; March 2001) of the *American Psychologist* devoted to “happiness, excellence, and optimal human functioning” (theme of 55.1).

This is not to say that creative writing is neither rational nor analytic, or that the creative writer lacks intellectual seriousness, severity, rigor, or commitment to the subject at hand. I am only arguing (yes!) that these qualities are cloaked in the freedom of invention and form and suppleness of voice that characterize creative writing. William H. Gass contends that critical writing is far less rational than it purports to be, that it is in fact a “veritable Michelin of misdirection; for the article pretends that everything is clear, that its argument is unassailable, that there are no soggy patches, no illicit inferences, no illegitimate connections; it furnishes seals of approval and underwriters’ guarantees” (25). But to pursue this line of thought is, alas, beyond the scope of this essay.

Conformity, conventionality

and their consequent predictability—though anathema to creative works except the most formulaic westerns, detective stories, or bodice rippers—are the necessary hallmarks of respectable academic writing. Academic readers expect academic writing to exhibit decorum and propriety appropriate to their discipline. When they are reading for substance, they cannot afford to be distracted by departures from conventional form and style, what my agriculture colleagues object to as “flowery writing.” To violate the conventions of the discipline in which one is writing is to mark the writer as either highly naive¹ or very unprofessional. Or so the academy believes. Arabesques and pirouettes, however graceful, are not encouraged.

Nor is the author’s individual, human voice generally welcome, particularly in papers written by teams of authors, as in the hard sciences. Gass observes that such writing must appear voiceless, faceless, “complete and straightforward and

¹ An example must suffice, though in true essayistic spirit I apologize for using a footnote and the necessary citations as well. Now for the peroration. In general, to claim in a critical paper on Shakespeare that “Shakespeare was a great writer,” though true, is considered a mark of critical naiveté, for everyone (however that is determined) knows this. Nevertheless, if a noted critic, say Stanley Fish, were to make that claim, the cognoscenti would attribute this to extreme sophistication—since he couldn’t possibly be that naive—and try to puzzle out what arcane meaning he intended by making such an obvious statement.

footnoted and useful and certain” even when it is not, its polish “like that of the scrubbed step” (25). This suppression of the self, that might otherwise be manifested in the individual writer’s voice and distinctive features of syntax and vocabulary, has the effect of making a given piece of academic writing sound like every other piece in the same field. For a single writer’s voice to speak out would be to speak out of turn, and thus be regarded as intemperate, immoderate—calling attention to the speaker rather than where it properly belongs, on the subject.

Again, the same journals that allow for affective presentations also allow their contributors, instead of writing exclusively in critical jargon, to speak in their own, identifiable voices, for which such authors as Peter Elbow in composition studies and Nancy K. Miller in autobiography criticism have become recognized. In general, the author’s untenured status dictates conformity to disciplinary conventions. Although the safety of tenure might encourage authors to come out as human beings, the decade or more of forced compliance—in graduate school and on the job—is much more likely to instill future adherence to the rules than to encourage romantic rebellion, especially when other academic rewards depend on continuing to play by those very conventions. My colleague, geologist Bob Thorson, explains that his award-winning *Stone by Stone: The Magnificent History in New England’s Stone Walls*, though 287 pages including notes and bibliography, “counts as much as one article” in merit raise calculations because it’s written for a general audience rather than specialist peers.

Efficiency, Economy

Prudent academic writers squander neither time (“time is money”) nor words. “Omit needless words,” emphasize Strunk and White, in the enduring *Elements of Style*: “A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences” (23). In *A Writer’s Companion*, Richard Marius reiterates, “Professional writers are efficient. They use as few words as possible to say what they want to say. They use short words rather than long ones when the short words express their meaning just as well. They get to the point quickly” (663). This advice appears geared more to a svelte body of Word Watchers in, say, advertising or the sciences, than to the more zaftig corpus of creative writers who must flesh out their skeletal texts in order to please themselves—and attract readers.

By this criterion, the writer’s ideal composing process would be equally efficient. I question how often the ideal is actually met, for it is antithetical to the unruly, wasteful, disorderly means by which creation usually occurs.² Thus, although Connors and Lunsford in *The St. Martin’s Handbook*, for example, accurately explain that writing process is “repetitive, erratic,” recursive, “and often messy,” rather than proceeding “in nice, neat steps,” they hold out the hope that “writing can be a little like riding a bicycle: with practice the process becomes more and more automatic” (3-4). To the extent that process follows format, this

² Neurologist Anne Flaherty’s research reveals the consensus “that drive is surprisingly more important than talent in producing creative work.” As Thomas Edison noted, “Genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration,” but the 1 percent “sliver that separates the workaholic genius from the merely workaholic” is crucial. “Generating reams of text without some talent is not enough. As Eyler Coates put it, ‘We’ve all heard that a million monkeys banging on a million typewriters will eventually produce a masterpiece. Now, thanks to the Internet, we know this is not true’” (B7).

may be true. It may be possible to write on automatic pilot if writers are working with predetermined forms of academic and professional writing, such as research reports, business memos, literature reviews, lab reports, and writing against deadlines where time is truly money.

But, as any poet would attest, there is nothing automatic about either the practice or the process of writing within the conventional forms of poetry. Couplets, sonnets, villanelles, odes do not come trippingly off the pen any more easily than the less circumscribed genres of essays and novels. Even allowing for the occasional product of divine inspiration that arrives full blown from the head of Zeus, to insist on—or to expect—efficiency in the creation of poetry or any other creative work would be to substitute a deadly virtue for a lively art.

Order

Order itself can be a deadly sin or a lively virtue. It's a sin if it interferes with the act of creation itself. Creation is an inefficient process in part because it is disorderly, proceeding often by free association, randomness, or what one critic has called "the deep well of unconscious cerebration." If writers try too early in the work's gestation to impose order on thoughts-in-process, this attempt may cut them off prematurely. PowerPoint presentations caricature the deadly version of order, arrangement made explicit in a series of short sentences or sentence fragments, limited, limiting. Five paragraph themes likewise become their own caricature. In fact, any written construction where the organizational scaffolding obscures or interferes with either the substance or the style becomes victim to the very mechanism intended to sustain it.

Yet writing that looks disorganized is as disreputable as disorderly conduct in the realms of both the academy and belles lettres, for disorder implies mental laxity and shows disrespect for one's readers. Order here is a virtue, and a lively one. In the best of all writing, what looks casual, as if it were the product of chance and circumstance, simply is not. Even the appearance of disorder, the stray curl escaping from the tight bun of hair, must be carefully calculated and aesthetically justified. Strunk and White acknowledge this in their realistic analysis that accommodates both the necessity of good design and the vagaries of the procedures by which it may be attained: "A basic structural design underlies every kind of writing. Writers will in part follow this design, in part deviate from it, according to their skills, their needs, and *the unexpected events that accompany the act of composition*" (15, italics mine). Writing, they say, "to be effective, must follow closely the thoughts of the writer, but not necessarily the order in which those thoughts occur. This calls for a scheme of procedure" (15). However, they add, "In some cases, the best design is no design, as with a love letter, which is simply an outpouring" (not so, I contend, among great letter writers, who leave nothing they can control to chance, including Cupid), "or with a casual essay, which is a ramble" (15). This is disingenuous of White, America's supreme essayist, who leaves a most careful path of footprints in returning "Once More to the Lake."

Punctuality,

like Order, is another virtue that can be deadly or lively. As my Ohio State professor made, perhaps, too clear, the academic and business worlds must run like clockwork in order to function well. If the writing produced against their deadlines is simply good enough to do the job but no better, that's all right for most people, most institutions, most of the time. When the Muse must report for

duty on time, at least the work gets written. Only selected creative writers and major thinkers—Proust and James Joyce come to mind—are expected to meet Matthew Arnold’s criterion of “the best that has been known and thought in the world,” and allowed by the workaday world (to which they are sublimely indifferent) to take their sweet time about attaining this standard of excellence—and even then, not at all times or under all circumstances. What is premature closure on a work in progress must be decided by individual authors (perhaps nudged by editors with deadlines of their own) on a case by case basis, a balance between production and procrastination. If a deadline weren’t looming on this piece, I’d demonstrate on the basis of textual and biographical evidence the deterioration in quality that too often occurs when authors are rushed into producing hasty sequels to their earlier works written with world enough and time.

Ain’t Misbehavin’: The Virtue-Laden Personality

Even if I hadn’t been the dutiful daughter, I’d have flunked the *Mademoiselle* College Board anyway. I lacked the personality of the hardboiled journalist embodied in Dashiell Hammett; my good cheer and habitual courtesy negated a possible seat at the Algonquin Roundtable, even if I’d written well enough to warrant one. I have been persevering but not pushy, intellectually innovative but not reckless—though as my position has become more secure I have been taking bigger and bigger risks, in subject, style, and technique. From my student days to this, my writing has proceeded deliberately. I’ve never been able to write fast, or against daily deadlines, or first drafts (some portions of what you are reading are in their fourteenth, fifteenth, no, eighteenth incarnations). In short, I have been by temperament—and ultimately by training—far better suited for life in the academy than in the newsroom or a garret. I have wanted to live a life of the mind, but—until my recent, more reckless incarnation—not to die for my art.

Whether or not I possessed the talent, I lacked the ego. If all artists regard their work as painter John Currin does his own, “I always thought I was the best, even when I wasn’t the best. Every artist worth his salt thinks he is the best” (qtd. in Solomon 44), then I was not a true artist, for I always thought the canonical writers were the best. So I had been taught throughout college, and so I believed in the talent of at least the Major Writers, those who had two powerful names, like Virginia Woolf and Ernest Hemingway and Robert Frost, and reputations to match. Novice creative writers in search of exemplary models learn to compare their efforts not with the formative works of writers they admire, but with their mature, benchmark writings. Novices seldom study major authors’ Works-in-Progress, Emily Dickinson’s fly, perhaps, stretching its wings rather than buzzing; Thoreau’s underbrush that only over time spruced up into Walden’s immortal woods. As a rule they dissect, only and always, the finished, polished writings from which the detritus of the creative process has been swept clean. Beginners can’t match these, or even come close. Only the strongest—or the most naive—egos, perhaps coupled with awards and early publication, can sustain aspiring authors at this stage.

The rest, always judging their work against the Masters (who are invariably “better than me”), can never measure up. Such judgments are always self-defeating and ultimately drive many—the moderately talented (and those very talented who

irrationally consider themselves mediocre), the unsure, as well as those who need the assurance of regular paychecks—to take the more conservative route.³ Until the job crises of the past fifteen years, teaching appeared to be the path of greater professional certainty, and this dictated a degree in English rather than in creative writing. Today neither alternative is certain; jobs listed in hope on the MLA's fall Job List melt like snow in spring, particularly those in creative writing. By not taking the Big Risk, I like most of my peers sealed my fate, heading full tilt down the critical track buttressed by the seven deadly virtues, particularly after I entered graduate school where the union card was a doctorate, which had to be in literary criticism or philology or linguistics; there was no creative writing alternative at the time.

Although I believed at the outset of my doctoral study, and continue to believe, that criticism is a parasitic activity, for even those who proudly proclaim the death of the author sustain their own reputations on other people's creative works, I nevertheless spent seven intensive graduate years learning how to do just that. Having chosen an academic career, professional survival meant that I had to publish early, often—and in academic journals, and to turn out clean, well-lighted papers that followed their conventions⁴—this was oddly satisfying. (I thought of comparing the pleasure at seeing the stack of resulting publications to the joy of encountering a pile of crisp starched and ironed shirts, but since ironing ranks second only to washing floors on my scale of detested household tasks, I eschew that simile.) Little did I realize how inimical duty and its somber handmaidens would be to the creativity I also craved. Nor could I have known that it would take a quarter century to shake off their stultifying influence. However, this devotion to duty did earn me tenure at each of the four institutions involved in the major professional moves of a peripatetic dual-career marriage.

And All That Jazz: One Foot on the Tightrope, the Other in Midair . . .

Tenure, for the timid, cannot be overrated. This safety net offers the security to venture out on the tightrope of creativity; of risk; of labor-intensive innovative

³ Sylvia Plath was an accomplished and well-rewarded writer of 26, married to poet Ted Hughes, when she addressed these issues in her *Journal*, "What if our work isn't good enough? We get rejections. Isn't this the world's telling us we shouldn't bother to be writers? How can we *know* if we work hard now and develop ourselves we will be more than mediocre? Isn't this the world's revenge on us for sticking our neck out? We can never know until we've worked, written. We have no guarantee we'll get a Writer's Degree. Weren't the mothers and businessmen right after all? Shouldn't we have avoided these disquieting questions and taken steady jobs and secured a good future for the kiddies?" Whereas the more faint of heart would have taken the steady job, this determined poet asserts the creed of courage and commitment that even the most talented writers need, "Not unless we want to be bitter all our lives. Not unless we want to feel wistfully: What a writer I might have been, if only. If only I'd had the guts to try and work and shoulder the insecurity all that trial and work implied" (270). Plath's sense of insecurity is justified, even though at the time she wrote she had been publishing her poetry regularly and in respected places.

⁴ Oops, another footnote. Although I walked the walk, I have always refused to talk the talk, eschewing academic jargon in favor of more engaging but no less precise language, as I hope this essay has illustrated. In the spirit of judicious restraint, here I also eschew a five page peroration on the subject.

projects short or long term with the assurance that if all else fails, if no one loves the new work as its proud creator does, the job will still be there. Even after I am safely tenured and understand this intellectually, I don't feel it in my writer's heart, and continue to crank out the conventional academic papers—partly as a way to demonstrate to my colleagues (I am department chair for a while and have to set an example) that composition studies is a serious, tough minded discipline, and not for intellectual wimps. Then, in 1987, an existential crisis impels me to take the dangerous step of coming out as a human being in my writing. Terror makes me reckless.

My husband, Martin, a professor of social work, cheerfully healthy for the three decades of our marriage, has begun waking up with headaches that within a short time keep him (and soon me) up throughout the night. Their escalation takes him from the dentist to the internist to the local ENT specialist and finally, as his vision dims, to an ophthalmological surgeon at the state's major medical center. By this time I am chauffeuring him everywhere he needs to go, for he cannot see well enough to drive, though with blind faith he continues to teach. On the long journeys to and from the hospital, to another far distant hospital where the emergency CAT scan is performed, and back again, we are listening to *Barchester Towers* on tape. I cannot now remember anything about the plot, or even the characters, but I remember hanging onto every syllable of every sentence, sensuous and sinuous and spellbinding, as if our lives depend on not missing a thing. We even rewind the tape to recapture the glory of the best lines again and again. And I know when we see the films of the scan, the clenched-fist white spot under Martin's right eye, bigger than a golf ball, pressing against his brain and diagnosed as a malignant brain tumor, that I have to write about what means most to me at this moment and to write in the vertical pronoun so skinny that there's no place to hide. Weighed in the balance of life and death, there is little to lose if this new work, fully human but incorporating just as precisely controlled support and sense as any of my formal academic writing, doesn't get published. But it does, all of it, and in better and better places. I complicate the intellectual and aesthetic demands of every task at hand, cutting back and forth between narrative and analysis, illustration and argument, just for the delight of being out there on the tightrope. In the grave act of writing I defy gravity, ever experimenting. I forget about the safety net; I just need to cling to the sounds and the sentences.

Oh, I still write academic documents, keeping the arabesques and pirouettes, the jokes and puns and perorations out of the innumerable reports, memos, reviews, grant applications, letters of recommendation necessary to make the academic wheels go round. These days it sounds to me as if I am ventriloquizing these works, trying to subdue (though never to suppress) my human voice that might distract the readers from the necessary work at hand. A little razzle, but no dazzle.

But creative nonfiction, free form essays, on academic topics and well beyond, are where my heart is now. Why did it take fifty years to start to play, to work so hard, to have so much fun? This is a rhetorical question, answered by the piece you are reading now. Yet aspiring writers, in as well as out of academia, should not feel obliged to wait half a lifetime to write their heart's desire. They should not need the compulsion of a major crisis, or perhaps even the security of tenure, to lay their lives on that taut line. Chill the devotion to academic Duty, and, if the writing is good enough, the rest will follow.

"If the writing is good enough." There's the rub, exacerbated by the salt-in-

the-wound of George Bernard Shaw's sage observation, "He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches." We who teach fear that we "cannot." Yet if creative writing is important to us—and it is, or we wouldn't be English teachers—we should at least give ourselves the chance to write in the genres that attracted us to the profession in the first place. This means getting in touch with our Inner Writer, turning off the nay-saying voices (at least for awhile), and allowing enough high quality time to develop our work. In a life full of demands and distractions—and whose isn't?—we may have to carve out the time in half-hour or hour long chunks, no excuses, no postponements, when we can be isolated, alert, productive. If we keep this appointment with our writing even three times a week, over time the writing will add up, a collection of manuscripts born to be read—and validated—by competent, critical readers. Easy to say, hard to do, exhilarating to have done. Without persistence the work will not be written, and without rigor the writing will not be revised and re-revised until it is polished to professional luster. This compressed discussion makes the process sound too easy, the results too inevitable, though the qualities identified here—commitment, concentration, perseverance, and rigor—could readily be construed as the virtuous foundation of a productive life of any sort.

Some authors find sustenance, support, and solace for this long, often solitary process in writing groups, such as the celebrated one formed at Duke by Cathy Davidson, Jane Tompkins, Alice Kaplan, and Marianna Torgovnick. An informal jury of one's peers, these meet on a regular basis and thus provide deadlines as well as critical feedback, at whatever stages of the process the writer desires. I personally have found comparable groups either too argumentative or too soft, so I write alone and wait for a critique until the penultimate draft of any piece is done (commentary too soon, before I'm sure where I'm going, could derail the project). At that stage, with trepidation that has diminished only marginally over the years, I count on my husband, a prolific author and journal editor, and a couple of other reliable readers to read with meticulous acuity and stringent suggestions for improvement. Then I rework the piece again, perhaps several times, with more critical readings, still too easy a description.

Then it's time to submit the work, and wait. Our initial attempts, whether creative or critical, run a high risk of rejection. Acculturated to the demands of the seven deadly virtues, we are likely to interpret the rejections (even of our juvenilia) as proof that we lack talent, that our "writing is bad, conventional, sloppy, dull, dumb, offensive"—the first reason for rejection offered by Dave Smith, co-editor of *The Southern Review* (21). Indeed, Smith estimates that in an average year the journal receives "in excess of twenty thousand poems," of which he publishes the works of some forty-eight poets, many of which he has solicited from frequent contributors. (If Smith's co-editor, James Olney, publishes a comparable number, the odds of rejection are 200:1—not auspicious.) Yet that rejection may actually mean a number of possibilities other than bad writing, which Smith also identifies: "Writing is average; we have no time to teach improvement"; acceptable writing, wrong subject; "writing is good but spotty: subject undiscovered, unfocused, incomplete"; good writing, but wrong genre or wrong timing or too long; or—what we might fear most if we but knew it—"Writing is good but John Updike's, already in consideration, is better" (14-17).

Even if we were told any or all of these reasons, and they made us feel better, what should we do when the tenure clock is running? Should we continue to send

our work to literary magazines or turn to academic writing in hopes of better odds for publication? These are individual judgments, gambles. As we all know, there is an abundance of little magazines far less selective than *The Southern Review*, just as there are second, third, fourth tier academic journals whose acceptance rates are published annually in *MLA's Directory of Periodicals*. We can continue to write, continue to submit our work to the most hospitable publications if we choose not to start at the top and work down, keep a lot in circulation, persevere, and hope for the best. Unless we have been tone-deafened by deconstructionist or other critical jargon, if we write with intelligence, enjoyment, and rigor for, as Gertrude Stein says, "myself and strangers," it is likely that our work will be published. I am tempted to add the real-world reminder, "even if we have to do it ourselves," but of course that doesn't count.

Upon publication of one's creative writing, the writer gains stature, authority, a certain cachet. A new audience will appear, strangers drawn to become friends. These days, in addition to citations, I get fan mail—which I always answer. See for yourself, just write me at Lynn.Bloom@UConn.edu. In engaging my readers, I am never disengaged. I care about this writing as much as, well, life itself. This writing is so exhilarating, I would die if I could not do it.

Readers also want to tell me their stories, and to know about my life. Did this really happen? (Whatever it is, you bet it did.) And what happened then? Who would ever ask about the life of the writer behind a strictly academic essay? Who would care? So, did my husband survive? If you've read this far, you already know. Martin's just fine, thank you. The surgery removed the tumor, and the biopsy revealed it to be the most rare, and the most benign, of possibilities. With his new life, he has enabled mine as well, replete with a superabundance of lively sins. ☺

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