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# The Teacher as Writer

In thinking about the writer as professor, I assume we are talking of the teacher who produces literary works, not historical writing or scientific writing which every professor can and should engage in as part of his professional duty. The question is, can the poet be a good poet, or the novelist a good novelist, and at the same time earn his living by teaching in a university? Or is there something incompatible between the two activities? Which suffers, if at all, the teaching or the writing?

I do not believe there is a simple answer to this question. One can at least assert that there is nothing incompatible in the two functions; witness the very large number of writers in Canada and the United States who are in fact, or who have been, teachers. To take Canada alone, one thinks of A.J.M. Smith, Earle Birney, Roy Daniells, James Reaney, Jay Macpherson, Ralph Gustaffson, Douglas Jones — the list could be greatly extended among poets. Hugh MacLennan, like myself, taught school before he entered the university, and the novelist-teacher is anything but rare.

Then we see many examples of writers who have engaged in other professions quite as exacting as teaching, or more so. Two of the most remarkable among American poets would be William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens, the one a practising pediatrician and the other the legal adviser to a large insurance company. Williams says he delivered 2000 babies and wrote forty-nine books. Both these writers attained the very first rank. One thinks of St. John Perse and Ottavio Paz among diplomatists; of Lampman and Douglas Campbell Scott among Canadian civil servants; of Heavysege the cabinet maker; of Milton Acorn, a carpenter. Is talking to and associating with students more destructive of the creative

talent than carrying on diplomacy, ministering to patients, advising clients or executing laws?

The truth is that most writers at the outset, and certainly poets, are unable to sustain themselves by their writing. If they have private means, like Shelley, or a rich patron (Canada Council in part fulfils this role), they may be launched on a successful writing career without the necessity of other employment, but few can hope or wait for this. Not infrequently the wife is the patron; she teaches or otherwise earns a living to help support the writer-husband. Many examples of the reverse situation could also be found where the husband supports the writer-wife, as with George Eliot and Virginia Woolf. Jane Austen was kept by her family. Writers must eat, sleep and be clothed; any solution to this problem that enables the work to be done is a good solution though not always the best solution.

It is obvious that most writers are capable of devoting a good deal of time to other activities. Stephen Leacock wrote in the early morning and taught afterwards. Trollope, an employee of the British Post Office, gave himself a fixed schedule of so many hours per week ontside his duties and disciplined himself to obey it. The number of writers performing religious functions is legion. Gerard Manley Hopkins became a Jesuit priest at twenty-four. Hemingway was satisfied if he wrote 800 words a day, though these took all his creative time. Some free time there will always be in the writer's day which can be gainfully employed. The university offers a congenial milieu for the writer and provides more leisure than most other employments.

Some critics affirm that it is precisely this congenial milieu which is detrimental to good writing, and that the poet is thereby reduced in stature and stultified in his emotional development. He is removed from the struggles and tensions of a more "real" life. Of some poets no doubt this may be true, but it may also be doubted if they are the kind who would have risen to greater levels had they accepted the material consequences of a monastic dedication to writing. And surely to be entirely supported by inherited wealth or some relative is even farther removed from reality; yet this may produce great writing. One of our most emphatic denouncers of the writer as professor used to be Irving Layton, yet, quite apart from the fact that he made every effort to get into a university and has finally succeeded, he supported himself by teaching during his most creative period. I once asked him how many hours a week

he devoted to his students in the various schools he taught in (I had then a formal lecture load of about seven hours) and, thinking for a moment, he replied, "Twenty-eight." Yet that year, if I remember rightly, he produced two volumes of poetry.

I do not think the writer is handicapped by having to devote some of his time to other activities. Indeed, these may be essential for the development of his personality. What is important is that these demands upon him should not be too exacting of time and energy. I think it is also important that they should possess within themselves some creative outlet or opportunity. I believe there is only one kind of creative energy in an individual, no matter in which way he uses it. The more it is fostered and developed in a given direction, the more likely it is to reach a great height. Singleness of aim will make possible a deeper mastery of an art as more hours in its practice will increase its output.

An artist must express himself. He is driven by an inner compulsion. I doubt if communication to others is essential to him; he must create to satisfy himself rather than an external audience. As he is also a human being, some communication is inevitable. But the drive to self-expression will be seen in everything he does. One who can express himself in prose or poetry is likely to make a good teacher if this should be his choice. If he cannot teach, he will lose his job as teacher.

In my own case, I did not begin to write much poetry till I was a student in my third university (McGill) and had I stayed in the practice of law, with its infinite commitments to other people's troubles, it is doubtful if I would have produced even the little that is mine. I jumped at the opportunity of teaching instead of practising law, early in my career, because I was attracted to the wider view of law as a potentially creative instrument for the building of a better society — the same attraction that led me into politics. All I was doing seemed creative. Poetry was but one form of my creative expression and I could not have been satisfied using it alone. Indeed my wish to be a pianist came long before I wrote poetry, and I have spent as much time enjoying myself at the piano as I have making poems, though I am the merest amateur. I felt no emotional incompatibility in the several activities. But the time consumed in one form necessarily reduced that which could be devoted to another.

There is a glory surrounding the great writer which makes it difficult to imagine him engaged in other more mundane

activities. We feel that the poet at least should be in a kind of permanent ecstasy, shedding upon us divine truths in inspired language. He should be singing to himself on the slopes of Parnassus, not teaching boys and girls in a classroom. This romantic image omits the valleys that separate the peaks of achievement. It is not without its grain of truth but it will never give us the full biography of the writer. As Mavis Gallant recently said: "Talent does not care where it sits; it's like a bird in a tree."