

**Dung Kai Cheung**

## **TOWARDS WRITING AS A FOLK ART**

Teaching writing. These two words sound extremely simple, even a little boring. We all take it for granted that we know what they mean, at least separately. But when put together, and considered seriously, they sound, somehow, like a paradox. The paradox is that, for many, writing is something that cannot and need not be taught. It comes from talent, and either you have it or you don't. You are born with it. Nobody can give it to you or take it from you. It is a gift. In the end, writing becomes the privilege of the few chosen ones. For the rest of us, writing remains forever a failed or unattainable aspiration. But thanks to a recent trend in the pedagogic enterprise, something called "teaching writing" has been created, into which all those who are not destined to be the greatest writers are thrown to teach and be taught. It is like some sort of a second- or third-class cabin to heaven. At least you can get on and end up somewhere in the right neighborhood.

As a writer and a teacher of writing, I don't think so.

Writing, as any other art form, is often envisioned in the form of a hierarchy. At the top are the few gods, mythical and canonical figures, who represent the highest talents and achievements a culture can beget. In the middle are a larger number of writers or literary practitioners who may be interesting in various ways but are certainly playing the supporting roles in the great drama of literary history. At the bottom is the anonymous majority formed by the readers of literature. I am not sure where the critics stand. To be sure, the appreciation and cultivation of "greatness" is indisputable. But writing is not just for greatness. I would like to suggest another model of envisioning the practice of writing, in which neither the renowned nor the obscure are precluded.

Rather than a hierarchy running from top to bottom in terms of literary talent, like the seven-storey mountain of purgatory, I suggest that we view the activity of writing as a wide spectrum. That is, we move from a vertical model to a horizontal one. At the one end where writing is most intense, concentrated, prolific and artistically mastered are the most recognized writers of an age. At the other end, the difference is not in talent or greatness or achievement, but in the meaning of writing to the practitioner. For those who do not become great writers, writing still means something, often a lot. And for those who only read, some experience in writing will certainly enrich their appreciation of what they read.

What I am proposing is no less than an idea of writing as a folk art, or writing as a personal and communal practice. In what we call folk art, the existence of expertise and amateurish practices

are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they reinforce one another. There are always those who take the lead or mark the heights, but everybody is more or less participating, and benefiting from it. Aided by technology, the age has come when writing and the dissemination of writing have become more independent of traditional forms of publishing. Some celebrate and some resent the saying that nowadays, everybody can be a writer. But I see in it the possibility of a more “democratic” view of writing.

That’s where, finally, teaching comes in. When writing is taught with a whole spectrum in mind, students are encouraged to find in writing a meaning for themselves and for others, with all meanings equally valid. Some may aspire to higher standards, greater commitments and wider cultural significance, while others can rest assured that writing as a habit also does them immense good. In whatever part of the spectrum, writing helps one to cultivate creativity, sensitivity, vision and responsibility. By the last I mean the capability and readiness to respond to the calls and challenges of the world. These qualities are certainly not taught directly, but they can only be conveyed or inspired through an intended act of teaching, with a spectrum of learners as wide as can be imagined.

One example is the change in point of view, and the coexistence of multiple points of view in narrative. This is more than a literary technique. It requires one to step out of habitual, and sometimes prejudiced, ways of seeing and empathize with the thoughts and feelings of others. That’s what literary imagination is all about. And the comparison and contention between perspectives can lead to critical thinking. In my experience, students can learn to write across gender, generation and class differences. For example, there are community writing projects in which young students visit elderly residents of old districts, writing their stories to rebuild a sense of local history and communal life, and working against the devastation caused by the ruthless logic of urban development.

We will continue to need great writers, but writing as a personal and communal practice is no less meaningful to the self and to the whole. Writing does not always need to be taught, but teaching, if undertaken with the correct perspective, will certainly bring out the most meaningful in writing to anyone searching for it.