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Statement of Teaching Philosophy

People use language for two reasons: to be understood and not to be understood.
—Dean Young, *The Art of Recklessness: Poetry as Assertive Force and Contradiction*

Poetry can provoke us and it can connect us. When leading a poetry workshop, I want to help students write poems that are capable of doing both at once. To that end, I recently began a class by making the audacious claim that there are only two types of poems in the world: "Reasonable" ones and "Unreasonable" ones. I then asked students what these two kinds of poems might look like. As a class, we decided that "Reasonable" poems are those in which the poet is using language in order to be understood (in Young's terms); "Unreasonable" poems are meant "not to be understood." A "Reasonable" poem might be akin to a realistic photograph, a representational painting, or a personal essay, while an "Unreasonable" poem is somehow more abstracted, more syncopated—like improvisational jazz or a Jackson Pollock canvas. Together, we hypothesized that "Reasonable" poems seek connection, while "Unreasonable" poems are inclined to provoke. To illustrate these two approaches to the making of a poem, we considered two examples: Natasha Trethewey's "Domestic Work, 1937," and Tomaž Šalamun's "The Circle and the Circle's Argument."

The Trethewey poem blends some of the elements of narrative—character, scene, conflict, climax—with poetry's heightened attention to form, sound, and image. Line-lengths are uniform as are the number of beats per line, and the rhythms are regular—nearly even iambic. Students in the class concluded that Trethewey presents her ideas in such clear, controlled (and beautiful) language because she has a specific point to communicate: what is grueling, demeaning work in one context can be a source of exalted liberation in another. Asked to choose, students unanimously agreed that this poem has a bias to connect with the reader—it uses language in order to be understood.

The students immediately discovered that Salamun's poem proceeds very differently from Trethewey's. It leaps from image to image, sound to sound, and they found themselves never quite sure what to expect in the next line. Many of them believed the language and imagery to be every bit as beautiful as that in the Trethewey poem, but they had a harder time describing why it was beautiful. The poem attends to sound differently as well. Its rhythms are more irregular. There are patterns to the sounds, but the poem doesn't seem quite as interested in maintaining control. Most students had difficulty describing what the poem is "about," and some of them found that difficulty unsettling. Even the students who were drawn to the poem's aesthetic agreed that, by sheer virtue of its willingness "not to be understood," Salamun's poem is provocative.

Generally speaking, we were able to agree that both poems are "good" poems. For the record, I assured the class that both kinds of poem have long, venerated, and multicultural histories, and that there are, in fact, some contemporary poets who consciously and conspicuously veer from one style to the other within the same poem (for instance, the group of poets critic Stephen Burt has categorized as the Ellipticals). Most importantly, though, we were then able to break the dichotomy down by talking about the ways good poems *very often* subtly blend features of both styles. Salamun's poem (re)connects us to the cosmic logic and language of dreams, of the subconscious; Trethewey's poem prods us to face some doggedly vexing truths about race and class in America. Both of these poems challenge us intellectually, emotionally—just as they connect us, in letter and in spirit, to a deeper sense of our own humanity. The best poems do this, regardless of aesthetic sensibility. I take it as my task as a workshop leader to help poets, of all sensibilities, in what Young refers to as the "zigzag sail" between these two parallel universes of meaning.