

## On Teaching

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*Since we are here for each other, teach them as best you can. Failing that, be kind. It is the power of the gods; and after all, who is there to stop you?* --Marcus Aurelius.

I like this meditation from Marcus Aurelius because it acknowledges that no matter how hard I try, I will not be the best teacher for all students; that even if I cannot help a student through my teaching, I have an ethical obligation towards them that calls on me beyond my contracted role; and that I always need to keep at the front of this effort the fact of power, use of which requires vigilant care.

In some sense, my philosophy of teaching begins and ends there. But between the lines I can add that I believe in imaginative writing as an intrinsic good; and that I try to honor each writer with whom I work by paying close attention to their writing, their progress as a writer and a teacher, and their person. What are you trying to do in your writing that's special in its expression of your talent and who you are?

As a teacher, I tend to read everything a writer writes with the intensity that I bring to reading a poem, whether it's a draft of an actual poem, or an essay (or some other form of prose), or an email. My aim is to read your work openly and carefully, to try to understand the poem you are trying to write, and to help you realize that vision in language and the shaping hand of art. That involves listening at the level of the syllable, and attending to every aspect of the work, from phoneme to phantom, which is to say the spirit that animates the whole. I expect writers enrolled in the MFA Program to bring that same intention to everything they do. I emphasize the practice of creative *reading*, and modelling (the classical curriculum of *imitatio*); and I believe that the writing of the moment we're in, historically speaking, relies on knowing a wide array of literature; and that to understand what's *been written* requires engaging with the writing of right now. Literary history is important to know, but ultimately it needs to be set aside to read with the insight that matters most: how to live right now and write to live now. Poems exist simultaneously for me; there is no past, the future is only a promise, the promise of the poet.

Poets in the MFA Program can expect me to push them harder than they may have experienced with teachers in other programs (especially undergraduate programs), but with a large degree of flexibility and sympathy; I wish to meet every writer where they are, wherever that is. I listen to the poets in the program and learn from them, not just about poetry, but also about who they are, where they come from, and what they're aiming to accomplish. That's one image of the world. The work we do together, in the context of the graduate workshop, the forms seminars, and individual thesis hours, consolidates into a concentrated push: to give the poet everything they need in order for them to leave the workshop behind and take the next step in whatever direction they're heading.