

Painting a Classroom

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"She was wonderful! She gave me all sorts of good ideas for my paper on education, and then when we started to talk about homeless children, she began to cry. She said she had never thought about the problems they face trying to stay in school."

This—or something very like it—was what one of my freshmen told me after she interviewed one of my colleagues in the School of Education. My composition students were writing about education, any aspect that really interested them, and they proved to be both thoughtful and open about their fears. They were worried about violence and gang warfare, about peer pressure that silences girls in the high school classroom, and about athletic and academic scholarships. They looked at the way architecture affects learning, and they compared graded and ungraded primary schools. Almost all did interviews: I had promised to send them to student-friendly teachers for up-to-date ideas and information. What better way, I thought, to get them involved with experts in the field, those who cared enough to take the time to talk to curious and somewhat shy freshmen and, above all, those who cared enough to be teachers out of the classroom. My friend in Education—warm, intelligent, responsive—touched my student in a way that years of training in pedagogy could not have ensured. What is it then, that makes a classroom? Or, for that matter, a teacher?

One answer lies in the crisp paper cutouts of apples and autumn leaves, turkeys and Santas, shamrocks and hearts that dance across our early memories of elementary school rooms. After countless years of college teaching in classrooms with walls the color of pancake batter, I still love those cutouts. They seem to be a way of saying, like one of Magritte's absurd paintings of steam engines emerging from fireplaces or huge pieces of fruit trapped in tiny rooms, "This isn't a classroom, not really." Perhaps that is why I like those cutouts; they are emblematic of what teaching is all about. This classroom is not simply a row of seats: it is a cherry orchard or forest or the United Nations or Gregor Samsa's nightmare. Beckett's *Endgame* is not all bleakness: it is comedy, too. Dickens's *Bleak House* is not just a mystery about who Esther's mother is: it is about the way human creativity contends against entropy.

Years ago, when I was struggling fruitlessly to understand what was then modern art—the black-and-white shapes of Robert Motherwell, the wild drippings of Jackson Pollock, the typographical arrangements of Stuart Davis, for instance—a friend of mine told me simply to look at the works of art as expressions of the joy of painting. That is probably as good a guide to teaching as one might find. It is an expression of the joy of meaning, of seeing in the complexities that underlie the simplest of ideas not the thicket

of obscurity but the patterns that resolve themselves into the landscape that, as Hopkins says, is plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough.

We have a wide and varied palette, all of us. It includes the lovely, evocative language of the literature we teach, the texture of the words and the depth of the ideas, the ambiguous lights and shades of the "terrible beauty" that we read and experience. We also have our students: the one who works all night on a factory shift building someone else's luxury yacht; the paraplegic in a wheelchair; the young woman in the first stages of retinosa pigmentosa; the bright, untrained young man who was told he wasn't "college material." And we have students like the woman with six children who, at the beginning of a sophomore literature class, called out to me that while she had been washing dishes the night before, she had been thinking of Dante. We have in front of us a myriad of untold stories at which we can only guess.

As for canvas and drawing paper, we are lucky. I once showed a class a picture of a bombed-put classroom. It might have been anywhere. The few students were sitting attentively amidst the dust and rubble, while the blue sky shone in above. They had no books, no paper, no pencils—only their teacher. That picture needs to be posted in the electronic classroom, next to the pristine coolness of the computers; in the clean and orderly lecture hall, where chalk and blackboards abound; and in the seminar room with the polished mahogany table. It needs to be hung from the trees where students gather for outdoor classes, fearing neither bombs nor snipers. It needs to be scanned into my home page, where strangers are welcome to learn what they will about composition and world literature classes or about resources for Victorian literature. A teacher's canvas is her classroom, wherever it is; a teacher's student is whoever becomes part of that community. I think that is why my colleague spoke so openly to my composition student about homeless children and their plight in being educated, and why she was willing to be so open and so vulnerable.

So, gathering our gear, we step into whatever classroom is given us, indoors or out, electronic or architectural. We sit on park benches and on buses, at lunch counters and in our offices. And we confront all the variety of life itself. How do we put off the elements together, now that we have all been drawn together in this neutral space, this territory that has no meaning of its own until we create it? With Pollock and Magritte and all the others, we pick up our brushes and begin, not completely certain what will happen. And that is what causes the quickened pulse, the frisson of anticipation as we walk into whatever space we have been granted, and begin teaching. •