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The Voices in Our Heads: How "Real" Writers Negotiate Criticism

Marcy Tucker and Robin Carstensen

> "An audience is a field of force. The closer we come—the more we think about these readers—the stronger the pull they exert on the contents of our minds."
>
> ~Peter Elbow, "Closing My Eyes As I Speak" (51)

We remember watching Saturday morning cartoons and how now and then a character would have some sort of internal conflict portrayed with the aid of a little pair of his look-alikes perched on either shoulder, one of them an angel (conscience) and the other a devil (temptation). Even as children, it was easy to understand that these miniature figures represented the warring voices in our heads when we try to make decisions between doing what is right and what is wrong. And as children, we knew that the warnings and consequences of our actions were voiced by the authority figures in our lives.

Now, of course, we are adults, and we understand the many ways our decision-making is shaped by ideology, spirituality, life experience, and social conditioning, among other factors, and we are also aware (even in the most academic sense) that "holding on" to our past can haunt our present and disable our future, yet this knowledge alone somehow isn't enough to silence the voices of those who have been critical of us in ways that hurt, particularly by *words*. As teachers of writing, we are both committed to not doing to others (students) as others have done to us, and while we hear ourselves trying to undo some of the damage they already bring with them to our classrooms, we realize that although we are experienced writers, our empathy is present in part because we still live with the voices of our critics and we still battle the

same writer's fears, for those fears never really go away—we just somehow find the courage to confront them.

In fact, we have in effect negotiated a treaty with our fears, because we know that the mythic writer is, well, a myth. We know, as all "real" writers do, that writing is work, work, and more work. In fact, the end of the work is most times only precipitated by the deadline. We do not cling to notions of the inspired and magically gifted writer whose masterpieces flourish Romantically amidst long treks in the Alps, quiet midnights with crackling fireplaces and muted candle tapers, or tiptoed jaunts through daffodils. For us, it is a kind of work that we fend off life for, rearrange life for, and apologize to life for. Work. Physical, mental, emotional work. Work that requires tremendous courage. In fact, writer Ralph Keyes frames writing in terms of work that makes sense in a truly utilitarian way: "Courage is part of the job description." He should know, because he wrote a whole book about it, *The Courage to Write: How Writers Transcend Fear,* and each chapter is peppered with names of celebrated writers who have given testimony to their fears, beginning with his own:

> By the time I started my first book, there was no escaping the fact that anxiety had elbowed its way into my office to sit beside me, scrutinizing every word I wrote . . . Seven-day workweeks became routine as I tried to build walls of research and rhetoric strong enough to protect me from marauding critics. (6-7)

We became interested in Keyes' analogy to building walls, and our writerly selves imagined a host of metaphors to explain how each of us respond to this, especially because we are two very different kinds of writers. We are both academics, so we write to and for many audiences, but Marcy is a rhetoric and composition specialist, and Robin is a poet. We finally concluded that our walls are in a sense only in our heads—

that is, the chorus of voices in our heads. For us, the obstacles that haunt us are the real and imagined voices of critics, and what we aspire to in this essay is to debunk the myth of the writer in terms of fearlessness, and in doing so, to align ourselves with our students on the grounds that we both need courage to dismantle the walls. What follows is each of our narratives that touch on some examples of the voices of our critics, and a subsequent discussion of how we negotiate the voices in our heads.

Marcy's Voices

I was fortunate in having studied with composition specialists in my undergraduate years, so by the time I was in a doctoral program, I took for granted that I would be surrounded by a Murrayist sect of teach-writing-as-a-process-not-a-product followers, and, being so faithful, we understood that writing is constantly in a recursive flow of rewriting. And we all agreed that beginning drafts are by nature "rough" and that the guiding commandment was that we shalt not nitpick them, especially for technical or surface-level sins, although somehow we still felt compelled to chant the confessional disclosure, "I know this still needs a lot of work" when we asked someone to read our works in progress. But our like-mindedness about the drafting process apparently didn't universally apply to our spoken discourse, for I came to learn that there were apostates among us.

This revelation came to me (perhaps late) while I was completing my coursework in grad school. We were always assessed, either directly or indirectly, on our participation during classroom discussions, and these conversations were predictably competitive and even agonistic. It seemed not only appropriate but quite valued to "one-up" each other, so the unarticulated verbal game became to find something—anything—wrong with what a classmate said and to "run with it," as I more than once heard it defined. I remember one incident in particular when I made the horrific

mistake of saying that we "manipulate" our students in positive ways, and the class collectively erupted with attacks on what was perceived as my ungodly pedagogy—far before I had a chance to explain what I meant. The discussion evolved to a scholarly debate about the connotations and denotations of the word "manipulate." I realized then that we could not, would not, extend the same generous theories of process and revision to our spoken discourse as we touted for our written discourse, for it seemed that our academic debates, so steeped in a history of agonistic discourse, left no space for drafting—for a "speaking to learn" method of using the spoken text as a site of discovery in the same way that we value the written word and the meaning-making wonder of writing. In this way, talk is limited to performance and not a learning process, and like the final draft, it is then a product to be judged. When the verdict is critical in ways that preclude the opportunity to benefit, it becomes less productive and more punitive.

I have since seen this played out repeatedly in the academic workplace, from job interviews to department meetings to question-and-answer sessions after conference presentations—all venues where spoken discourse is performance rife for criticism, even when we welcome the challenge of debate, and I have, more often than I wish to recall, received negative criticism when I dared to "think aloud." In fact, I had always been very much like Maria in Glynda Hull, Mike Rose, Kay Losey Frasier and Marisa Castellano's article, "Remediation as Social Construct," an energetic student whose conversational patterns in her remedial writing classroom so deviated from the "norm" that her teacher unwittingly overlooked Maria's intelligence and translated her difference into cognitive deficit, labeling her "the Queen of Non Sequiturs" and noting that to her, Maria had "thinking continuity problems" (310). Part of what made Maria's discourse so seemingly disconnected to the structured (albeit artificial) classroom

environment was her willingness to think aloud—to work through her developing ideas through talk. But because most of us are so acculturated to class-talk, we know that students like Maria (and me) are thought to be less than intelligent.

This bothered me because so much of my own process in writing was spoken; in fact, a great deal of what I categorize as "pre-writing" for me is talked out, and the more I learned about my individual process, the better I have been able to use talking as a necessary and effective strategy, especially when I hit a snag. I recognize that when I do get stuck, the voices of my audience seem to be drowning out my own:

> *"But what does this have to do with your claim?"*
>
> *"Wait a minute! I disagree!"*
>
> *"Isn't that source a little dated? Don't you know more current scholarship?"*
>
> *"That's been said before. What's new here?"*
>
> *"I'm bored. Reject!"*

The scholar side of me knows that these are points that I should listen to, but the stubborn side of me insists on persevering with what I want to say, so perhaps my talk-aloud method is my own strategy to quiet those critical voices and fight to maintain the integrity of my own. It is the premise of Elbow's "Closing My Eyes As I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience" in which he writes "to celebrate the benefits of ignoring audience":

> When we realize that an audience is somehow confusing or intimidating us, the solution is fairly obvious. We can ignore that audience altogether during the *early* stages of writing and direct our words only to ourselves or to no one in particular—or even to the "wrong" audience, that is, to an *inviting* audience of trusted friends or allies. This strategy often

> dissipates the confusion; the clenched, defensive discourse starts to run clear. Putting audience out of mind is of course a traditional practice: serious writers have long used private journals for early explorations of feeling, thinking, or language. (52)

I disagree on one tiny point of Elbow's comment, and at the risk of nitpicking one word (I hear the voice of my imagined reader accusing me of hypocrisy), I take issue with his use of the word "serious," for I think the level of strategizing he describes here is more of the experienced writer as opposed to the novice writer; our students may not have the kind of productive failures that we have had that enables us to fight for our own voices, but that does not mean that their concern for their writing is any less serious. Nonetheless, his point is an important one, for he is arguing for an acknowledgment in our teaching practices that students need venues in which they can honor their own thoughts without interference. The empowered writer *takes* that option; it is not given.

Of course, the key difference in the performances of speaking and writing is in the presence of an in-person or an imagined audience, but the psychological effect remains, for both audiences are *real*. Whether or not we can productively move past unnecessarily negative criticism is, in my mind, largely a matter of experience. The fact remains that whether or not novice and experienced writers have the ability to transcend criticism that seems more like an attack than feedback, the residual effect may still be indelible.

Robin's Voices

All writers want to make a difference. We want our voices to swim through the madding crowd, rise, and be heard. We hope that our work of art—a stage upon which we have given ourselves permission to be open and boundless in our energies, needs,

affections, and tensions that guide our life—will be heard. This is a tall order, inviting the audience to come forth and find connection and understanding, to join the speakers and consciousness of each poem or work of art toward some reconnection, some miracle of revelation. As a poet, this small miracle I want to achieve in each poem can feel like a nearly impossible feat. Knowing that the greatest poets have had similar fears can be both comforting and daunting. On writing poetry, Adrienne Rich reflects: ". . . I have known both keen happiness and the worst fear—that the walls cannot be broken down, that these words will fail to enter another soul. Over the years it has seemed to me just that—the desire to be heard, to resound in another's soul—that is the impulse behind writing poems, to me" (xv). So how can I, barely known in comparison to even the most modestly published poet, accomplish being heard among the audience of thousands of poets out there writing and publishing the most remarkable, well received verses in the leading print and ever-expanding online journals of established and emerging presses and magazines? And how much more intimidated might the student and novice writer feel, wanting to create a small miracle, something of meaning for him or herself, as well as some miracle of connection with the wider world of the classroom and beyond?

The greatest, most imaginative writers have taught me that the sense of recognition a reader feels—the universal relevance—occurs when the writer can take the reader beyond the surface into the depths where imagination and feeling intermingle and create self-revelation. I do care deeply that my poems manage to take the reader there—that readers may experience these as much as theirs, each poem a familiar situation, though they may not have been here before. I like how David Baker writes about this in "I'm Nobody: Lyric Poetry and the Problem of People": "Those things that seem to separate us—making each self distinct from each other self—are

precisely those that most connect us, that we most recognize in ourselves, that we most share" (204). This need to make a connection is also a source of anxiety. How to make a connection when so many others have come before? And who am I to call upon myself to suppose such a connection?

I sometimes have the fear that my work seems too insular or self-indulgent, or that I won't be able to connect with my reader and their contemporary lived realities, or that my poetic craft hasn't developed well enough to create the "union of deep feeling with profound thought" as Coleridge described first overhearing Wordsworth read his great semi-autobiographical "Tintern Abbey." Writers need the social engagement in their processes, especially, I believe, the student writer who is working toward moving beyond the confines of the classroom. This was the case for me as I entered my doctoral studies, where I brought with me a sort of anxious excitement at the prospect of learning with—and from—others like me.

The creative writing workshop is a long standing tradition from its inception at the Iowa Writer's workshop in 1936, where it was designed to bring graduate student creative writers together to develop their craft under the mentorship of a seasoned and well-published creative writing professor. This style of workshop has since become the standard. Typically a session begins with a student's piece under response. The instructor and peers each have a copy and have usually read it in advance, and the student writer is requested to remain silent (for the purpose of not voicing defensive) and listen to his fellow writer's/responders. Like my peers in my doctoral program, I came to the workshop with my own vulnerabilities and a strong need for encouragement and validation from an audience who had already been developing their craft and were invested in improving and publishing. I wanted to receive recognition and value for my work. I also wanted to be able to develop my craft and

learn to discover my own unique voice and aesthetics. But I soon discovered that if I were lucky, I would receive thoughtful guidance some times while other times manage to thwart off any long-lasting damaging criticism so that I could pursue and develop my most unique strengths.

In this environment, when a student's draft is "up for review," it customarily follows that the teacher will open the dialogue by asking for feedback from others and then offer his or her own. Or the teacher speaks first and others follow. I have been in workshops where this takes place in the absence of any pre-established criteria for the goals and appropriate methods of responding. In my own experience in the "hot seat," my peers—uncertain of how to respond—would often respond with feedback that was inaccurate or unaware of the aesthetics or poetic conventions I was attempting to employ. Or the novice peer would try to attack the morality of my speaker's choices and conflicts within one of my poems. In other instances, I was told by male peers that I couldn't write about *this* or *that* subject, that I couldn't write from such a personal view, or that I should avoid "graphic" images and be more subtle. Well-meaning comments would sometimes come off as condescending and unhelpful, such as the time an older male peer—commenting on a new poem of mine—remarked how much he liked this one in contrast to my others where my personal "angst" got in the reader (his) way. At moments like this, I wanted to defend my choices or "angst," and thus the tension roiled into volatility. Instead of leaving with some direction for the poem, I would often leave with a tangled nest of suggestions and recommendations, and a desire to punch something hard. Even in my older age working with peers who were ten and twenty years my junior, and with my own thickened "skin" for workshop criticism and a tougher sense of self and voice in my poetry, I was often left with self-doubt and confusion.

These are times when criticism has little or no redemption value; in other words, responsive feedback should not shut down the writing process but should instead bring with it something of which the writer can take away to facilitate meaningful revision. I think the invested writer has the right to expect this. Listen, below, as famous editor of a well-known literary journal (who shall remain nameless) writes an email of rejection to me.

Dear Dr. Carstensen,

Thanks for sending new poems our way, and for your patience. I've been reading and rereading "What Is Leap," and I must congratulate you on writing the very first poem (in complete sentences) in many years that COMPLETELY ELUDES MY ABILITY TO PARSE IT. I have no idea what this poem is "about," even as I admire its lush prosody.

Unfortunately, my inability to articulate anything about the poem--I felt like Ringo Starr in _Caveman_ whenever I tried--made it even harder to retail to my less-than-enraptured editorial staff. Alas, I must therefore reject it.

I'm sorry; it's our loss. Please do keep us in mind for future work.

With regret,

Nameless Editor

His sarcastic congratulations, illustrated further by his inclusion of words in all caps, is packed with sarcasm and hostility, resentment. He doesn't stop there but mocks the poem with an allusion to an old movie and points to his "less than enraptured staff," suggesting he played the "good cop / bad cop" routine but was unable to convince his *staff* of the value of my poem. When he finally invites me to keep their journal in mind for future work, the trust is gone and I'll never even consider the idea.

He took the time to eviscerate the poem and offer criticism, but it's vague. There's no specific guidance, no line that he points to that asks me to consider a more specific image or move toward clarity. So, he's as obfuscating in his criticism as he accuses me of being in the poem. Perhaps most important, he doesn't recognize the merit in my attempt to explore a complex subject. In my attempt to make an original move and take huge imaginative leaps (in this particular poem, evoking the voice of the universe), I needed guidance to see my way through the fog and to help readers see through it, to make a clearing. The teacher, or editor, in this case, has the opportunity to ask for the clearing.

I was able to move forward and not let this unprofessionalism sway me from working on the poem and resubmitting it elsewhere, but the sting of his critique remains. And I have to remain vigilant against self-doubt encroaching on the necessary energy for writing and submitting my work for publication.

Quieting the Voices

"I think we're all bozos on this bus."

The Firesign Theater, 1971

The quotation above is from a comedy routine and its album of the same title, and we chose to include it because it is what our former Director of Composition, Robb Jackson, used to say all the time. Those of us who knew and loved him understood that this reflected part of his life philosophy and that it was a way of reminding us to not take life too seriously; he helped us on countless occasions see our way through the fog, as Robin puts it. We were both graduate teaching assistants under his guidance, and this "Robbism" (for he had many) was relevant to our combined roles as writers and teachers of writing. It seems appropriate here as well, because it places all of us who struggle with writing on common ground. Robb encouraged us by example

to not lose our affinity with our students in terms of simply being committed to remembering what it feels like to be one. We believe this is the basic foundation necessary toward helping students to re-imagine what it is to be a "writer." Instead of focusing on what sets the "good" writers from the rest of the pack, we need to be reminded of what we have in common.

Placing ourselves on common ground enables us to learn from each other—through each other's stories. In writing about her first published work, a collection of short stories published in 1899 titled *The Greater Inclination*, Edith Wharton candidly recounts the thrill and anxiety she experienced:

> I had written short stories that were thought worthy of preservation! Was it the same insignificant I that I had always known? Any one walking along the streets might go into any bookshop, and say: 'Please give me Edith Wharton's book', and the clerk, without bursting into incredulous laughter, would produce it, and be paid for it, and the purchaser would walk home with it and read it, and talk of it, and pass it on to other people to read! (113)

When she received the first critics' articles, she opened them "with trembling hands and a suffocated heart," and while most were positive, one "condescending critic" wrote: "'When Mrs. Wharton has learned the rudiments of her art, she will know that a short story should always begin with dialogue'" (114). Appalled that a professional would think that there was just one formula for "every short story ever written or to be written," Wharton instantly recognized how ridiculous this criticism was, and so instead of being emotionally damaged by it—or, perhaps worse, taking it as reason to redefine her craft—she instead found it liberating:

> In an instant I was free forever from the bogey of the omniscient reviewer, and though I was always interested in what was said of my books, and sometimes (though rarely) helped by the comments of professional critics, never did they influence me against my judgment, or deflect me by a hair's breadth from what I knew to be "the real right" way. (114)

When Marcy first read Wharton's autobiography in which she tells this story, she was inspired by how decidedly Wharton dismissed her critic and how steadfastly she placed her bogey in the past. She knew that the critic's comments made no sense; it was impossible for her to accept that each short story must begin or end the same way, just as no one criticism could be applied to every piece of writing. Yet, this is what we may be doing when we allow the past voices of criticism to invade our current writing tasks. We need to learn to do what Wharton did: take back our ownership of the text, of our creations.

C. L. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon call attention to the irony of the teacher of writing as the one who sustains control of judgment: "Could a more peculiar rhetorical situation possibly exist than one in which the person supposedly creating a text must yield control of its character and shape to the ostensible audience?" (120). They argue against what they call the "tyranny of an Ideal Text," meaning the supposed perfect paper we have in our minds and against which all else must be measured. The facilitative reader, on the other hand, is one who makes comments that are designed to preserve the writer's control of the discourse. The more productive comments are those that *facilitate and support* revision:

> It's the rare composition teacher who reads student writing with the assumption that composers legitimately control their own discourses, who accepts the possibility that student intentions matter more than

> teacher expectations as a starting-point for reading, and who recognizes that writers' choices are supposed to make sense mainly in terms of those intentions, not in proportion as they gratify a reader's view of what should have been said. (120)

The truth is, writers most accurately aren't writers—we are rewriters. The chorus of voices that we must attend to disrupts the writing process—a process that demands a reality far from the imagined mythic writer scribbling down perfect magic the first time out. Ted Kooser, former Poet Laureate of the United States, says in *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*: "People are always surprised that I might take a single short poem through twenty, or thirty, or even forty versions before I think it's finished. Linda Pastan, an award-winning poet whose poems are frequently less than a page in length, said in a radio interview that some of her poems go through a hundred revisions" (16). What those of us in the profession—whatever genre or venue—take for granted is that we are aware a sign of progress for us is that we have had multiple revisions. For students who come to the college classroom not yet having this sort of experience, the expectation that they revise might seem punitive at best and a sign that they are "bad" writers (or no writers at all) at worst. We believe, then, that it is important from the first day of class to begin to help them understand this very fundamental difference in thinking about (re)writing.

All writers need to realize a sense of recognition and value in our works. We also want the sense of connection and continuity with others and their work. As we develop our craft, we learn to discover our own unique voice and our aesthetics, but along the way we need to learn how to process and negotiate critical feedback. We need a system for sifting through the voices to recognize those that facilitate revision and those that simply don't feel right. In the classroom, we believe it is crucial that we

make very informed and deliberate moves to help novice writers develop their systems of knowing how to deal with the voices in their heads. This can only occur with trust. But just think for a moment what this involves: we are asking students to put their thoughts on paper and subject themselves to the Tyranny of the Ideal Text, to trust the stranger in charge at the same time without too much hesitation, for there is only one semester at hand. It seems only fair to give them a reason to do such a thing, and for both of us, we attempt this by voicing our vulnerabilities aloud to them. We tell our students just what goes on in our heads when we write something and then wait to hear the news of how well it is (or isn't) received. Just this past semester, Marcy told her students about some particular feedback she got on her own work that was nothing if not direct: "This article is going nowhere." How surprised she was when, instead of seeing horrified faces on a room full of nineteen-year olds who wondered how they could get a refund for the class taught by an imposter, they all began cheering her on with enthusiastic mantras: "Did he even read it??" "That's just wrong!" "Who would say a thing like that?" Now *those* are some voices she will enjoy remembering.

We recognize that there are indeed two sides to the criticism process, for there is the giver and the receiver, and both parties are equally responsible. We don't want to imply that we are simply helpless victims of thoughtless critics who cannot for the life of themselves recognize our genius, nor do we mean to suggest that harsh criticism can never reflect the truth we and our writing need. We want to acknowledge, as well, the elephant in the room: sometimes *we* are our worst critics. So often, we write the scripts of uncertainty, doubt, censure, and condemnation, and *ours* are the voices that invade our writing. Sometimes our fears are the little devils who have an uncanny resemblance to ourselves and who perch themselves on our shoulders and whisper in

our ears the discouraging warnings that keep us from taking the chances that *all* writers must take in order to be read. Ultimately, it is each of us who must take responsibility for all things written, all things said, and the cacophony of the voices in our heads.

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