

Conspirators

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I am interested in language because it wounds or seduces me.

—Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

I’ve always been suspicious of Good Teacher movies, for they often embody Hollywood’s concept of teaching as a noble sacrifice, teachers living a cloistered lifestyle. Even when they’re well directed and well acted, these movies bear little resemblance to the hard work of teaching. In an actual classroom I’ve discovered that the work is absorbing but not always immediately rewarding—that what is teachable may only work partly, or may work sometime in the future but not now, or may not work at all. The problems of teaching don’t translate well to film: the awkward silences, the missed opportunities, the individual solitude that must, to some extent, be broken if there is to be a class and not merely a horde of strangers in the room.

Maybe it’s unfair to expect cinema, or even a highly competent writing class, to reveal what is invisible, inaudible, even irrational. Yet these are qualities that I associate with the making of a genuine teaching experience, a process that feels more lyrical than narrative. As a teacher, I have to ask students to be vulnerable, not only to recover intense episodes from the past, but also to reflect on those experiences without overlooking their emotional power. On the surface, much of my work involves controlling the process. I create the emotional weather, choose what we will read aloud, what movie scenes and songs we will interpret, what we will write—but I do not deter-

mine precisely how that writing will shape itself. That shaping is a collaborative effort.

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I'm a lousy archivist of my own writing. Once I've finished something, I seldom want to hold on to the messy evidence of how it came to be. With my students, it's a different story: I encourage the acquisitive habits of the pack-rat. Nothing they've written during the phase of a particular essay may be discarded: what has caused them to come to a particular thought, even if the thought seems disconnected from what they think should go into the finished essay. If they doodle, what have they drawn? When they scribble in the margins of a text, what were they paying attention to, and what do those gestures say about them as thinking writers? Readers, I've discovered, can be powerful enablers. If texts are the dreams, readers enter and enrich those dreams by helping young writers see what they have done.

Despite all the physical evidence that Di Yang's essay began as a sequence of written exercises, I can scarcely remember how "Chairman Mao, the Exile, and the Ravaged Cyclist" came to be. Maybe I'm glad to have this little mystery about how the parts collided, just so, to make a captivating whole. The leap—a sudden conceptualization or recollection, like suddenly remembering the name of a long-forgotten place—between drafts is not always retrievable. The series of incremental writing exercises leading to a draft promises a heap of material to be plundered, nothing more. The leads might be compelling, but often they're false leads. (Though there is always hope that they may be useful for something else: again, the archivist's defense of conservation.) In other cases, the student fails to develop the evidence in a way that both teaches and entrances the reader. At best, what materializes just before the first attempt at a finished essay is a labyrinth: the writer on the inside trying to get out; the teacher-reader on the outside, ensuring that the getting out is not too easy. If a powerful whole emerges from the drafting phase, from the seemingly disparate pieces of evidence, the teacher will most likely have been transformed into an enabling reader. That was the case with Di, or Andy as he likes to be called, but when I read his essay now, I also realize how much he taught me about my role as a reader.

One thing I do remember was Andy's uncanny intuition for finding the *right* particulars. Even when his written English faltered, his exercises succeeded because they beckoned me to learn more, and because he indulged my curiosity. *Make something of this*, I prompted him on his written exercises. For

the first several weeks, our conversation occurred almost entirely on the pages of his assignments. When this written conversation between teacher and student works, it assumes the intimacy of a written correspondence; it makes me remember the paper letters I exchanged with friends in the days before e-mail. The delay between classes creates a kind of suspense; the letter is not only making its way to the recipient, the recipient is thinking of something to say in response.

Andy pleased me because he seemed to be writing back intently, not only answering my questions but thinking of questions I hadn't imagined. When we met for the first time face-to-face, outside the class, we found we had a story we could share: we had both been to Mao's mausoleum. Andy saw it as a Chinese, while he lived in his native country; I saw it as an American, while I was a senior at NYU on a scholars' group trip. With few exceptions, my peers and I weren't close. Their habits annoyed me. They brought video cameras into the emperors' tombs where all photography was explicitly forbidden; they criticized the food in a way that seemed xenophobic, and then they dashed off to those American institutions, McDonald's and Pizza Hut, as soon as they could break away from the group. Minor as they might have been, these things made me want to avoid my classmates. If I could sever myself from the group, somehow, I thought I would try to be a good, attentive visitor.

"It was the first time I felt like an American," I confided to Andy. "It wasn't a very good feeling." And that's when he realized—we realized—that his essay had something to do with that feeling of being American, and more specifically, a New Yorker, for the first time. His perception of it was immeasurably different from my own, but there was that word he'd found in Andre Aciman's essay, "Shadow Cities": *exile*. It led him to everything else, I believe. To Mao, to our conversation, back to Aciman, to Warhol, and elsewhere; it was the spiral, unpredictable but elemental, the avatar of essay-making. Without it, art, politics, personal history, and geography could not live together in the same work. Or, rather, they could not be more than themselves.

Getting involved in the writing and revising process comes to feel like being part of an exciting conspiracy: Only the student and I, and the members of the writing workshop, know about the work coming into being. The rest of the world is shut out for the moment, because it doesn't particularly care if a particular essay gets written. Only the conspirators care.

During the conferencing phase, when I meet forty-six students in a kind of interview process, we move from the classroom's silence and chatter. The

windowless environment gives way to a place that is practically all window, all beautiful view. For that first face-to-face meeting, I meet Andy and my other students high in the Kimmel Center overlooking Washington Square Park. At times, the chaos and glamour of the park distract us. Woolgathering in silence, digressing in our speech, we drift away from our immediate goals. But we rest on somewhat equal ground. We sit in easy chairs, facing each other instead of my being shielded by a desk, issuing commands. The setting puts us both at risk in a conversation that should lead into an effective collaboration.

If we were filming a Good Teacher movie, the park would be the establishing shot; in the scene itself, the Good Teacher would not allow a silence to last more than thirty seconds without breaking in with a wise dictum. But in this different scenario we never know quite what will happen.

A shared correspondence, talk of a common visit, a confidence, and that one elemental word: was this *good* teaching? It all felt too accidental. As silly as those Good Teacher movies seemed, they still held me. In my own scene I wasn't like Mr. Holland inspiring an entire generation of young musicians. What I had done in my own classroom had felt like a performance, polished and personal, but not quite as dynamic as the one-on-one talks. Sometimes in class I used horror movies to get students' attention, to bring the urgency of suspense to our exchanges; at other times, I played love songs in Icelandic to get them to transcribe what they thought that particular kind of love would sound like if imaginatively translated. But here we are now, Andy and I, having a conversation that seems, in some ways, inconsequential—about the mausoleum of a dead leader. An amazing place, yes? Agreed. (But needless to say!) What does it mean, what does it remind us of, what is the idea taking shape in this essay? Surely, these questions are too simple, I think. This isn't *inspirational* enough. I feel a little self-indulgent recognizing this sliver of my own experience—the visit to, as Yang so memorably puts it, “the dead body of the country's history,” an experience that had occurred for me over a decade earlier when I was a student on a trip to Beijing and other Chinese cities. But here, in this conversation, I am seeking connections, asking Andy to sustain a conversation, to connect that one shared moment to other phenomena that might, in fact, lead him nowhere.

Often during these conversations, I feel as if I'm not interfering enough, not “being helpful” in a way that will encourage perfectly wrought, safe, clean sentences. I had always thought good teaching would mean that I'd have to do a lot of the correcting, a lot of the talking, and even a lot of the thinking—that teaching transitions would be smooth, the changes of mood and nuance

almost unnoticeable. Instead, I find myself constantly changing disguises in front of my audience. One minute I'm a sharp editor, the next an anonymous collaborator or incurable enabler, and a few minutes later I do or say something that might get me either respectful applause or a flop's hook.

Reading Andy's essay months after our conversation and written exchanges, what strikes me is how much the essay educates me. Andy navigates his idea not only by yoking the relevant evidence but also by turning away from false but attractive leads that often surface in preliminary writing exercises. He chooses to focus on the art exhibition "Dangerous Beauty," a show whose themes—body image, eating disorders, the hegemony of a rigidly defined beauty in our zeitgeist—seemed very visible, apparent, known. The danger would be to gravitate toward those pieces or those ideas that seemed to surrender their secrets too easily. Yet Andy eludes the compelling but limiting pieces that could distract him from what I will call the beacon image, the face of Mao, remembered from personal history and transformed in Andy Warhol's distinctive representation. These are Andy's words:

It is so magical that I felt a total strangeness when I saw Mao in such bright colors, the Mao whose stark, placid figure was once deeply engraved in my life. He was suddenly changed to a total stranger with a heterogeneous personality and figure, a man utterly indifferent to politics and revolutions who is only interested in showing off himself and the beautiful life.

In his quest for beauty in the present moment—as a student in New York struggling to come to terms with the city's extreme ugliness and beauty—Andy fixes upon this image of Mao that complicates conventional historical interpretations. Through the artwork's unexpectedly vivid color palette, a figure suddenly becomes something—someone—the viewer has never seen before. Indeed, the political leader whose sweeping "Cultural Revolution" often thwarted educational ambitions—so Andy reminds us, when he tells us about the resentment of his father's generation toward Mao Zedong—leaves us with a strange lesson: order and beauty can emerge where we least expect it.

When I recall my visit to China, when I remember what it was to feel like an American for the first time, I identify it as a political awakening—for reasons that had not only to do with my American peers, but also with my own stinging sense of being such a conspicuous product of Western culture. Shame made me want to exile myself in the temporary safety of my hotel room. Beauty crept into my perception also, but I didn't want it to: beauty of the coal-tinged air, beauty of the gauze masks worn by the people of Beijing,

beauty especially in the unforgettable sight of Chairman Mao in his glass coffin. Even seeing the body with my own eyes couldn't change him from myth to reality. He was as unreal as Sleeping Beauty. Caught briefly in that spell of unreality, I thought even New York, my lifelong home, seemed unreal.

In W. H. Auden's unfinished but brilliant "The Prolific and the Devourer," the poet cautions us that to "be forced to be political is to be forced to lead a dual life." The political and the personal: a dual life, even a multiple life.

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Now, after rereading and thinking more about Andy Yang's fine and memorable essay, I hunger for a new category in the cinema, or any art that overwhelms its viewers by force of its younger charges. What would we call it—the Complicating Student Movie? Certainly, we'd have to get *Student* in there, because students often play leading roles in the productions we mount in the classroom. When students are really good they can undermine our most cherished convictions about teaching, and the force of their individual work moves them beyond the rehearsed and the known to the more thrilling risks of improvisation—to performance itself. Helping students create essays, I feel nudged beyond the ordered and simplifying distinctions of Good Teacher, Bad Teacher. I move free of the stereotypes that can wound or seduce us and accompany my students into the land of great discoveries.