

Eros in the Classroom

When I am teaching and it is going well, I sometimes have the sense that the pedagogic transaction is occurring not just verbally, but through undercurrents that are erotic in nature. I feel a tenderness, a longing, an attraction for students that is not unlike someone in love. And I like to imagine that they may feel a similar warmth for me.

We live in a time of such heightened sensitivity to sexual harassment that a professor will think twice before telling a student he likes her dress. To admit, as I am doing now, that one sometimes has sexual fantasies about one's students seems risky, tantamount to breaking a taboo, or at very least icky, on the order of fantasizing incest. But how could it be otherwise, given human nature? A psychological study once ascertained we have sexual thoughts about twice a minute. I teach in a graduate MFA writing program where there are many young women in their twenties, thirties and forties, so ardent, so vital and at such a peak of beauty that entering a classroom can make my head swim. Over the years I've had mild crushes on any number of students: I say "mild" because it never reached the level of obsession, and often some years later I can't even recall their names, so how deep a crush can it have been?

Let me clarify: I have never dated, much less slept with, a student. I don't expect credit for that: it is simply, as I see it, part of one's professional code. When I began teaching, dalliances between professors and their students were common; and one often encountered successful marriages that came out of them. Still, there seemed an ugly power imbalance about hitting on one's students (though it was not always clear who had the upper hand, the infatuated professor or the experimenting student). In any case, the point, it seems to me, is not to act on those feelings of attraction but to acknowledge and observe them, as they course through you and around the classroom.

To what extent does it happen the other way? I have no way of knowing whether, or which, students speculate sexually about me. I assume it happened more when I was younger. I can remember one time when a very beautiful, married Puerto Rican student made her desire known to me, and I had to let her down gently by treating it as a case of transference: it wasn't "me" she was in love with, I told myself, but some father-figure lover she had projected onto me. In his seminal paper, "Observations on Transference-Love," Freud makes the wry qualifying statement that the analyst must not confuse the structural situation of the patient falling in love with him "with the charms of his own person." This is the tack I have always taken: not that it has happened so often--usually, my women students express no more than a warm fondness for me. Still, when it has happened I have deflected it by acting as if the crush were unreal. I almost said I have *pretended* it was unreal, because deep down I do believe it has some reality. To some extent, all falling in love can be seen as partly fantasy, by virtue of its distorting idealizations; but who am I to say that it is also *not* real? If it has been triggered partly by a student's physical attraction to a particular professor, if I happen to be her *type*, or if she is my type, then--alongside the familial, father-daughter transference--how is it different from any other instance of falling in love? Unless we are prepared to say that all falling-in-love is bogus, we must be prepared to take seriously the reality of such feelings.

Too, there is something falsely modest or reverse-smug in the teacher thinking: It isn't *me* she fancies, that's only a by-product of the pedagogic situation. If nothing else, this disavowal denies the possibility of one's own allure, which is insulting and cowardly, as it would be in any case of an inability to return unrequited love. Why not be honest and admit that one has the potential to attract? The danger, for the teacher or analyst, is not in thinking one could possibly be attractive but in believing one possesses some sort of charisma. Nothing could be more grandiose, or ruinous to the psychoanalytic dynamic than for the analyst to assume he/she is charismatic. Yet can we really believe that Freud himself never

made that assumption, when patients came to him from far and wide? In MFA writing programs, such as the one where I teach, there are star writer-professors who are magnets attracting students from all over, either by the prestige of their works or the renown that grows around their person. I would wager that all popular teachers harbor fantasies of possessing charisma, however unconsciously, and it buoys them when they stride into the classroom to face a bunch of (conceivably indifferent) strangers. I have often encountered a new classroom or an audience at a poetry reading and found myself unleashing a stream of excited energy and improvised jokes, with the intention of winning them over. To the extent that it worked, ought I to credit this as proof that I possess a shred of performance charisma, or ascribe it to the respect paid an elderly professional? Who can say? The point is that something of a seduction is occurring.

In her astute book about transference, *Death and Fallibility in the Psychoanalytic Encounter*, Ellen Pinsky notes that the analyst acts as a “tease” eliciting erotic feelings in the analysand, then backs away into an abstinent, neutral stance. “The analyst, as transference magnet, in effect courts the patient’s passion.” A very tricky game, it would seem. But at least there is a good deal of theory in the field of psychotherapy about the pitfalls and advantages of this transference/countertransference method.

What about teachers of creative writing? Are we conscious of the forces we unleash by our own seductions? Are we in control of them? I’ve seen very little written about this in educational literature.

The situation may be more fraught in my particular teaching specialty, nonfiction writing. Many of my students are writing memoirs and personal essays, and attempting to process for the first time some dark, secret or conflicted memories. My encouragement to them to write about such explosive material, if they seem to want to but are timid about venturing forth, may induce in them a great sense of relief when they do so. They are telling the stories they were meant to tell, and learning to fashion them into literary art, and

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in doing so they might develop an emotional dependency on me, wanting to follow me from workshop to workshop. Whether or not there is an erotic component to this dependency probably varies from student to student; meanwhile, I become aware of my own obligation to assure them that I am not going away, not going to abandon them as a person, even as I try to encourage them to study with other professors or complete the writing process on their own. I try to wean them, if you will. What makes this dynamic especially tricky is that, while eliciting emotionally powerful material, I am not a trained psychotherapist and it would be presumptuous to think of myself along these lines. Despite the overlapping factor of transference, here is where the analogy between teaching and psychotherapy breaks down. To be honest, I received no training as a creative writing instructor, as is true, I would imagine, for almost every writer who undertakes the job. We are all making it up as we go along, and in difficult, sticky situations commonsense and humanity must take the place of analytic technique.

To get back to my own on-the-fly observations: I notice that many ex-students, often the prettiest, seek me out for a chat after they have graduated, saying they miss me and want to catch up. I wonder if they had picked up some erotic spark, some partiality on my part by the number of glances I had directed toward them in class, say, and were flattered by that attention and wanted to see if it was still in operation. They give me hugs, pressing their breasts tightly against me, and kiss me on the cheek, all of which I try to take in the spirit of grand-daughterly regard. Some of them return because they were able to write freely under my tutelage, and would like to re-animate that sense of inspiration. Then again, it is not always the beauties who return: Some of the strongest attachments have occurred between middle-aged or elderly women and myself, the affection issuing from a wry appreciation of life's challenges and outliving them.

I had one such student, Amelia, who had been practicing law for years before she decided she wanted to become a writer. She took several classes with me, and we always enjoyed each other's sense of

Eros in the Classroom

humor. I did not, I think, have a crush on her, but I simply adored her. An activist in her community, she never got on a moral high horse with me: she had a practical, down-to-earth sensibility and was in all respects a delightful human being. Last year she died, suddenly, “of natural causes,” we were told (I assume a heart attack or stroke). I have been forcibly shaken by that loss. The assumption is that our students will all outlive us, and when they don’t, the order of the universe seems shaken. Theodore Roethke’s poem, “Elegy for Jane,” dedicated to “My Student, Thrown by a Horse,” came immediately to mind, with its beautiful last lines: “I, with no rights in this matter/ Neither father nor lover.” Such is the teacher’s lot: to acquire tender feelings for students, to relinquish them physically after graduation, to wish them the best and to watch them from afar flounder, flourish or perish.

Because death cut short any further conversation between Amelia and me, I am left to wonder at the nature of the satisfying gift that took place between us. If I choose to root it simplistically in the word “Eros,” it is partly because I am a Freudian and lack the philosophical or mystical vocabulary to explain otherwise these vivifying currents of feeling. I only know that while I am trying, in the classroom or in private conference, to put into words with my students the most articulate phrases I can summon, as though I were writing aloud, all this verbiage provides the pretext or the cover for an auratic intuitive exchange; call it an enchantment. Simply put, we read each other. We breathe in each other’s presence with a shared recognition of our comic peculiarities and the poignancy of our being alive together in the same moment, alert and sexy and lonely and fragile. This may finally be the grain of truth in that humble brag, “I have learned as much from my students as they from me.” What we learn is—each other.