I would like to begin by telling you that for the past two years I have been Visiting Writer at the University of the West of England. I visit the university for one day a week, teaching the creative writing dissertation module and offering writing surgeries to anyone – including academic staff, library staff, students and gardeners – on campus. My visits are funded by The Wallscourt Foundation, an independent financial body that further affirms my position as visitor rather than member of the academic faculty. Being a visitor is a special thing: it allows me to enter otherwise unenterable places and to see and be in these places at the same time as being slightly removed from them. In this way, from the very beginning, my position has been paradoxical; allowing me enough freedom to invent my own role whilst also being tethered to the peculiarities of an institution and all the rules and codes that this entails.

I am not an academic: I am a writer and when I gave my first reading at the university I soon became aware of some of the curious tensions that were beginning to manifest and would continue to manifest during my time there. Before I expand upon some of the more transgressive elements of that first reading, I would like to quote at length from a lecture by e.e. cummings. The quote is from his book of nonlectures and eloquently expounds upon one of the central difficulties I encountered during my visitis. Namely how it might be possible to not only teach how to write but how to live as an artist, because in my experience – and I can only talk from my experience – it is not possible to have one without the other.

"If poetry were anything – like dropping an atombomb – which anyone did, anyone could become a poet merely by doing the necessary anything; whatever that anything might or might not entail. But (as it happens) poetry is being, not doing. If

you wish to follow, even at a distance, the poet's calling (and here, as always, I speak from my own totally biased and entirely personal point of view) you've got to come out of the measurable doing universe into the immeasurable house of being. I am quite aware that, wherever our socalled civilization has slithered, there's every reward and no punishment for unbeing. But if poetry is your goal, you've got to forget all about punishments and all about rewards and all about selfstyled obligations and duties and responsibilities etcetera ad infinitum and remember one thing only: that it's you – nobody else – who determine your destiny and decide your fate. Nobody else can be alive for you; nor can you be alive for anybody else. Toms can be Dicks and Dicks can be Harrys, but none of them can ever be you. There's the artist's responsibility; and the most awful responsibility on earth."[1]

I gave the first reading of my own work at the university in late October and the vast lecture hall was not exactly full but not exactly empty either. I had decided to frame the poems and fiction I would be reading in a fairly loose and shimmering body, not quite a lecture, more a story that would hopefully offer a glimpse and an insight into where I had come from and where I might be going. You see, there are elements in my history that are crucial to where I am now; the fact that they happened in the past is chronologically true but the way in which they continue to resonate and inform my practice is also true. And so, things, important things, that happened to me then, thirty years ago, in many ways are continuing to happen to me now.

Take the light coming in through the window in primary school when I wrote my first poem. That light, the way it came through glass to spread itself across the pale carpet, the wooden frame of the window and the sense of space – is as important

[1] p24 ***i*** six nonlectures, e.e. cummings harvard university press, cambridge 1962

to my working practice now as it was then. Whenever I trawl the cave of my imagination, I also discover that, when I look up and out, that old sun is still shining and the sense of space around and within myself are immense.

Of course, you can know my work without knowing these things, but I considered it part of my responsibility as a living, visiting writer to conjure the universe I inhabit and an important feature of this universe is light. Which reminds me of a quote from the painter Edward Hopper,

"Perhaps I am not very human, but all I wanted to do was paint light on the side of a building."

Perhaps I am not very human either, but I am who I am and for me a large part of writing is exploring this amness and what better way to teach than offering examples from my own intrepid and mistake-ridden adventures? Which brings me back to the line I unknowingly crossed when in my inaugural reading when I shamelessly confessed that often, when writing, I do not know what I am doing. More than that, I told them, I am often completely lost and have no idea of how the different elements I write might begin to coalesce and form a whole. I illuminated this way of working by giving the example of the play I wrote for Radio 4. Not only had I never listened to a Radio play, I had never really desired to write one. Suffice to say that the opportunity landed in my lap and when I was told that the BBC not only liked the idea but were prepared to commission it I realised there was no way back. It was not a conventional play; it was a fusion of excerpts from real letters, live interview material and monologues from a fictional character. The threading together of these diverse elements was like creating a skeleton around the heart and then adding the muscles,

tendons, blood – all the usual things – and finally the skin. The play was very successful and so I foresaw no problem in talking about the fact that not knowing what I am doing is an essential ingredient in my work.

Of course, hindsight and reflection allow me draw out various methods and reasons why I eventually chose to do what I did and these elements of craft I am free to share and pass on to my students. And of course, there is nothing new in a writer saying that the unknown constitutes a large part of the process. But within an environment that is dependent, ultimately, upon measuring and marking and quantifying, how can I, as a teacher, advocate at one and the same time that there are elements of the craft that can be learned but that all of that learning will amount to nothing if the student is not prepared to dive into their own unknown and discover what is lurking there?

Many of the students I taught had written little or nothing before. This was not necessarily a disadvantage. But with each one of them I saw the moment of terror rising again and again; tell me what to do, tell me how to do this; and of course, I could tell what I knew but at the same time asserted that they had to begin the perilous and thrilling journey into what they too might know. There are no books, no maps, no charts for this; only endless cups of tea and talking and assuring and re-assuring conversations. But at the beginning and end of the day, as cummings said, they were beginning to glimpse the most awful responsibility of being alone in deciding their fate.

As I looked up from the lecturn during that first reading I was aware of a distinct chink emerging. The sea of faces stared, not with an intangible degree of disbelief, back at me. Who was this creature in their midst whom they had employed to teach Things Teachable talking about light on a classroom floor and not knowing

what she was doing? It wasn't until a while later that I realised what I had done. I had no regrets – how can honesty ever be encumbered with regret – but I had a deepening awareness of some of the complexities that might arise as I sought to bring my presence as a poet, playwright and novelist into an academic environment that for the most part relied upon, depended upon, the transmission of knowledge from the one who knew to the one who was there to learn.

Of course, all teachers know that they also learn from their students. But I am not talking about that. I am talking about the naked soul stretching itself out and, without intending to do so in the first instance, flouting its celebration of things unknown and unteachable as an essential and integral part of the creative practice.

Should I be talking about the soul here? After all, I am a writer not a theologian. But, and this is core to my argument, how can the condition of the soul not be talked about when we approach the teaching of the craft and all that that entails? If any steps at all are to be taken towards the immeasurable house of being then I am necessarily looking at how I live; how I peel a potato, how I talk to my grandmothers, how I pause by a river and see a pair of kingfishers singing. My being informs my writing; writing is a moment of being in itself, at least, it has the possibility of becoming this if we wish it to be so.

This is not to ignore all of the very practical things that can be taught with regard to writing. There are plots and characters and questions of structure and tension and the necessity of practice. But it is the less quantifiable aspects that I also wish to address because, as a teacher, I have to ask myself how I can create the conditions for my fledgling writers to embark upon the path of discovery that suits them best. Any less than this and I should resign; instantly and without second thought.

One of the exercises I employ in introducing students to potential immeasurability is to invite them to leave the classroom and to choose a place on campus and be there – sitting or standing – whilst doing nothing. It sounds like the easiest thing in the world. But. In a time when so much of our time is dedicated to doing it is often a radical and disturbing experiment. Some students experience great resistance. Some students are genuinely shocked to discover things they have walked past for three years but have never seen. Some students have been approached by worried others who have seen them standing doing nothing and considered this cause for concern. Often, this fifteen minutes of immeasurable being inspires a different perspective and when they come to write again it is with a much more detailed awareness of an environment and the people and things that inhabit it. In effect, the quality of their writing begins to be more real; not in any absolute way, but in a way that gives due respect and attention to all of the small things that go into building the bigger picture.

This way of working does not necessarily make for the best writing in the first instance, but it introduces an element of the craft that is essential in the long run. As Rilke once wrote,

"Works of art are of an infinite loneliness and with nothing to be so little reached as with criticism. Only love can grasp and hold and fairly judge them."

In teaching creative writing I am not solely interested in each student getting a good mark, and I hope to include things in my seminars that will serve them way beyond the two semesters and into a life-time of writing if this is what they choose to pursue. Many of them will not, thankfully, but some of them thankfully will. And so many of

the first steps are tentative and cautious because there is no longer a text written by someone else to fall back upon and criticize, there is only the wide open space of the blank page confronting them. And onto that page will go expressions of their own souls. With enough encouragement in the beginning stages they develop confidence to hear and use critical feedback at a later stage. Usually they have to silence their critical selves in order to be able to write anything at all and although this can be uncomfortable it can be extremely freeing. Here I look to Virginia Woolf who asserted that,

"Perhaps the quickest way to understand the elements of what a novelist is doing is not to read, but to write; to make your own experiment with the dangers and difficulties of words."

Experience first, examine second: write, and then see what you have written. Learn from yourself and others what works and what does not work. I sometimes felt that I was attempting to teach things in an upside down fashion – and when you're upside down the world can be a very unsettling place. The time comes for planning and plotting and scheming, but as with all writing, if there are no words actually written down on the page then what is there to talk about?

As Visiting Writer I sought to open potential spaces where debate might occur and questions might be asked without any answers being readily available. With this in mind I emailed poems around various sectors of the university at certain, significant days during the year. The response to this was varied: on the one hand it led to a lenghty discussion around the nature of truth, on the other, it led to instances of nothing less than myopic vitriol. For example, at the beginning of the war with

Iraq I emailed the poem Conscientious Objector by Edna St. Vincent Millay which begins, I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death. As a result of sending this poem I received some replies that can only be described as hate mail. I was duly informed that I was the most insensitive person alive and that I should not be allowed to work in a university. Although I was initially thrown by this response, I was excited by the potential dialogue that it opened up because not only had the respondants assumed that I had no relatives fighting in the war but they were also advocating censorship at a time when we were supposedly bombing Iraq in order to bring more freedom to its people. Unfortunately none of the hate-mailers took up my offer to discuss the matter further.

There was a second incident of this nature when I sent the poem Meaning, by Czeslaw Milosz around the university. A nameless Father from the chaplaincy wrote back declaring how delighted he was that I had chosen this poem because of its non-denominational leanings and thus its innability to cause offence. I subsequently wrote to inform him that not wishing to cause offence has never been one of my considerations – rather I am interested in the pursuit of truth and the enormous offence that this often causes. At this point I added that many of my fellow writers around the world were currently imprisoned or in exile for doing precisely this and that I would consider it to be a betrayal of my position and my loyalty to them not to advocate this and bring his assumptions into question. Again, unfortunately, the nameless Father was not tempted into debate and instead issued a curt dismissal.

I offer these examples because although there were many opportunities for discussion they rarely went very far. I am aware of the great time restrictions that are placed upon most of the people working in the university, but I was disappointed that

some of the potential dialogues, whose impact went way beyond the confines our of campus and into the very fabric of our world, were thwarted in their infancy.

Perhaps one of the contributing reasons was that, as Visiting Writer, I found myself in the unusual position of being attached to a faculty where there was little or no creative writing culture. There is no undergraduate or postgraduate programme in creative writing, just one option in the final year to do a creative writing dissertation. In an attempt to address this I established a board in the foyer to the Humanities building where I posted poems, prose and details of competitions and magazines. I worked with the gardeners and planted a word in the grounds made up of crocuses. The Head Librarian gained permission for me to write poems on the library windows as well as securing pieces of text onto the ends of book-shelves and in the stairwell. I set up a day of visiting writers and workshops and I also produced the university's first anthology of creative writing.

Making the anthology was an edifying experience primarily because of the great levelling that took place. Represented in the anthology were poems and prose by students, academic staff from different departments, shelf stackers in the library, M.A. students who were abroad, and a poem that had been contributed by a well-known and well-published poet. The example of such a wide variety of writers sharing the same platform and reading together was something new and altogether inspiring. It cut through many of the hierarchies that exist not just within universities but way beyond that and opened up a space where writing, rather than the measuarable acclaim of certain individuals, could be celebrated.

And at this point I break rank with e.e. cummings. For whilst I recognise the limitations of the house of doing, I also, paradoxically, recognise the limitations of the immeasurable house of being. And instead of asserting the priority of one over the

other, I suggest a more difficult path that weaves its way incessantly between the two. For I believe that creative writing, and the teaching of it, relies upon a balance between being and doing which in turn creates a third possibility. And this is the making of a culture and an environment where writers can not only write but also be read, seen and heard. Then, and only then, can the practice and craft of writers thrive and begin to take a more central and suitably supported – both financially and soulfully - place in the world.