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Outsider Institution: the Avant-Garde Pedagogy of the Chicago School of Poetics

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By Alli Carlisle

We've all said it: a poetry degree just isn't what it used to be. That's why Chicago poet Francesco Levato started his own poetry school.

Levato is himself an avant-garde poet whose work draws on cinematic and documentary techniques—in his own words, “engages subject matter through disruption of content and form, fragmentation of narrative and radical juxtaposition of visual and textual elements.” His poems, truly products of postmodern culture, sample: they collect, cut and redistribute pieces of other poems into new configurations. One long work, “Aura,” makes a fragmented, haunting dialogue of pieces of Robert Browning’s and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poems. A significant part of Levato’s work is something called cinépoetry, a kind of collaged videographic poetry that does with footage what his other work does with language. Levato also translates, a kind of work vitally connected to his poetic work, which involves so much transformation of extant materials into new forms.



Francesco Levato

Traveling around the country for readings and lectures, he found that audiences consistently asked him about his technique and how they could learn it. “Do you give workshops on this? Where do I find this kind of community where I live?” people

wanted to know. Even where there are workshops in more experimental techniques, Levato and other poet friends reflected, they are largely inaccessible outside the institutional bounds of MFA programs. For those people who don't live in urban centers and don't have the resources or ability to commit to an MFA program (programs that can run up to around \$50,000 a year), high-quality instruction and workshops in poetics can be hard to access. So Levato turned to that great equalizer and connector, the internet.

Levato founded the Chicago School of Poetics in the fall of 2011, setting up an institution that would exist both in a physical location and in the ether. The school offers courses in person at the Poetry Center of Chicago in the Cultural Center, as well as online workshops through the video conferencing service Fuze Meeting. A company tutorial video on the Chicago School of Poetics website demonstrates how it works, showing a hypothetical corporate meeting, cubicles in the background. It turns out it works just as well for poetry. For the most part, other online schools have operated workshops through email, with participants sending works back and forth with comments. That system misses out on what Levato thinks of as a crucial real-time element. "Having that face-to-face communication," he explains, "being able to articulate [...] in real time, impart this nimbleness in your thinking about poetry."

The Chicago School's model in some way provides for a radical accessibility, and yet it's not exactly meant to be a come-one-come-all institution. Most other schools that offer poetry courses to the non-MFA student, like continuing education programs "operate from the premise that everyone can be a poet," often tossing in poetry instruction along with other genres of writing. "We don't operate from that premise," explains Levato; at the heart of the Chicago School's vision is the belief that "poetry really should be treated as an object of art." Levato wants to offer high-quality instruction without the "crushing debt situation." In other words, to borrow a line from a classic art-house film, not everyone can be a great artist, but a great artist can come from anywhere.

Though the school does not offer a degree, Levato says, instructors have been talking internally about offering some form of accreditation, possibly through Mozilla's Open Badges initiative. The project offers a kind of online stamp for otherwise non-accredited learning. The open-source sensibility explained on their homepage echoes the Chicago School's: "Learning today happens everywhere, not just in the classroom. But it's often difficult to get recognition for skills and achievements that happen outside of school."

Inquiries into experimental accreditation are just one element of the Chicago School of Poetics' anti-institutional bent. Another element is the school's avant-garde aesthetic. Mainstream poetry workshops and the publishing industry favor anecdotal, lyric, narrative poetry, while the Chicago School's basic poetics courses might expose their students to styles like Japanese poetic diaries, a revived form dating as far back as the year 700. Like any other industry, poetry experiences its own internal dynamics, with push and pull between center and fringes. "You're always an outsider—the work doesn't get recognized by institutions until it becomes safe," Levato says. "Some of the most interesting being published are by small independent presses publishing in PDF or on websites or small-run chapbooks or small-run print editions. Work that is really challenging isn't coming out of the mainstream presses."

Asked about thoughts for the future, Levato says he hopes to expand the kind of collaborative and interdisciplinary work the school teaches and encourages, focusing particularly on cinépoetics. Feedback from students has been positive so far, and there's considerable excitement in the Chicago poetry community, too. Well-known local poet Larry Sawyer co-directs; other current faculty include Barbara Barg, Kristina Marie Darling, Steve Halle and Lina Ramona Vitkauskas. Levato says he receives unsolicited applications from people hoping to teach classes. If that's any indication, the Chicago School may be on its way to institutionalized success.



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