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Poetry And Freedom

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“People need poetry, to keep them from becoming robots.” ¹

—Andrei Voznesensky

Reading a poem is finally something which a reader, whether student or savant, must do alone. The study of grammar and composition, of semiotics, semantics and symbolism, is classroom activity in a way reading a poem ultimately cannot be. Despite having once written that both poetry and the classroom “belong to the public, shared world,” ² I agree with Geoffrey H. Hartman’s warning that “the pragmatic test of the classroom” is no measure of a poem. ³ Any hermeneutic of structures for the teaching of poetry must respect the place of the student as reader as distinct from the place of the teacher as reader or from the place of a class engaged with a poem. At best, a classroom can promote and accommodate a sense of private space analogous to what Gaston Bachelard has called the space of “reverie,” or daydream. ⁴ That reading a poem is much like daydreaming is much easier to entertain today than it was when I began teaching, twelve years ago, fresh from college and the New Criticism, before the anxieties of criticism which gave birth to the subsequent trend of seeing the poem as “a relational entity possessing a history and emerging out of a social context” had made much way. ⁵ Today, Cleanth Brooks risks revisionsim—certainly, at least, rewrites my historical experience in English 25 twenty years ago—by maintaining he was misunderstood, and that *Understanding Poetry* was not written *contra* aspects of reading that braved the limits of strict textual analysis. ⁶ I.A. Richards envisioned the poem as a psychoaesthetic nexus of social meaning; the “poetry ideas” of Kenneth Koch individuate the reading of a poem by putting it in the hands of each individual student—into the student’s hands in a directed, but personal and creative mode. That is where a student can make a poem his own. Students as mimetic poets are what Bloom would call “prospective Adams,” not “retrospective Satans.” ⁷ They do not defy or reject the poetic model; rather, they imitate, and of course produce a collision course along which the poem can be interpreted, even understood.

Of the various poetry movements and types of poetry realized in our time, the poetry of the Beats (which James Baldwin claims is derived from black literature, anyway), perhaps even more than black poetry or Women’s Lib poetry, has engaged a substantial adolescent audience. ⁸ Even today’s conservative and pragmatic young people are attracted by the romantic Beat themes of rebellion, individuality and freedom. Poets like Corso, Bly, Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti articulate a youthful, skeptical, innocent, rebellious, *adolescent* variety of American freedom, a freedom of the road and of personal style. The testing of limits is an

Ericksonian task of adolescence; because of its harmony with that developmental moment, Beat poetry can be as ideological as black poetry or Women's Lib poetry. I.A. Richards in *Principles of Literary Criticism* promoted the possibility of raising our "standard of response" not only *to* art but also *through* art to experience in general. Certainly among adolescents "movements" in poetry have served that developmental function, and, if only in classrooms, have the power to continue to do so.

It is today as easy as ever to lead students into modeling poems of their own upon Beat poems in the Whitmanesque first person, employing striking adjectives that enter the object and elicit some inner quality, especially after a study of merely photographic, visually descriptive poems such as those of William Carlos Williams. The pitfalls here are the excesses of stream of consciousness and catechism, and the typical ruminative adolescent lines. Beneath their quieter surface conformities, students are still ready to *Howl*. Here the poetry idea provides an insistent structure which helps the introspectively-biased student poem remain in the realm of the readable.

But the importance of personal freedom to adolescents goes beyond the thematic into the structure of adolescence itself. Teenage slang is often an assault on the conventions of standard usage. Yet teenage poets will reject their own often decent poems because they are embarrassed by their language. This often happens when they have to confront their problems with standard English; their language seems less than "hip," or, in current slang, "smooth." What matters here is that adolescents are even more embarrassed by language than the rest of us, because language is a major vehicle of identity, and adolescent identity is "in process" and insecure. The mimetic quality of childhood desire and creativity, amply demonstrated by the success of poetry ideas as elementary school teaching devices, is virtually identical to adolescent desire, but it is further burdened during adolescence by "adult" shame: over-obvious imitation is seen as revealing a lack of character. What the adolescent resists in the poetry idea is what goes against the freedom and dignity of his own identity. The best derivative adolescent poetry braves embarrassment and makes free with its models, striking off on its own.

That "terrible onset of self-consciousness," which Koch ruefully sees as the great difficulty in teaching teenagers to write poetry based on his "poetry ideas," risks an adolescent vitality which can become the first principle of a high school poetry curriculum.⁹ Adolescent self-consciousness is an Ericksonian adolescent task. Bachelard would cultivate such self-consciousness in the hope of arousing the introspection, personal space, and reverie which are vital to poetics. In *The Rule of Metaphor* Paul Ricoeur argues that vitality is essential to metaphor.¹⁰ The current gradual return of poetry to the schools, displacing the "basics" fad, is a small part of the widespread, spontaneous reaction against overweening technological civilization. The mass media entrance, but do little to develop, their audience. The fads that they promote answer the adolescent need to belong to an identifiable peer group, but do not satisfy the concomitant needs essential to poetics, for creativity and individuality. Neither is poetry being promoted by school boards, educational administrators (with rare embattled exceptions) and committees. Probably those teachers who do labor to create an audience for poetry in the schools are themselves moved by the same needs they look for in their students. Poetry can create a place—idyllic to nightmarish—within which one may be free to be oneself.

Ironically, any poetry curriculum invites the proper rebelliousness of adolescents. Teenagers are characteristically testing their own limits; they want to believe themselves autonomous, not derivative. The teenager who identifies himself as a poet, as so many of us once did, is particularly likely to be made uncomfortable when he is told what and how to write.

Student poems derived from one of Koch's poetry ideas are especially *occasional* poems assigned to the

course of a formal curriculum, and direct, if partial, in their imitation of a model. Such poems may merely “go through the motion,” but this is to be expected when poetry-writing is assigned. While imitativeness that is no more than mimicry can sometimes seem disarmingly deferential in a pre-adolescent, it is a measure of the formidability of adolescent experience that such slavishness has no charm for us. Being a teenager is tough. Adolescence is a rite of passage, and we demand of the high school poet some substantial sense of the poet as an individual.

The student poem based on a poetry idea can be a demonstration of character. Like fine occasional poetry—Robert Frost’s “In the Clearing” or Ben Jonson’s epitaphs—the best poems inspired by poetry ideas do not lack significance. The relationship, then, between the student poem and its model can be seen as a vitally generative one—one which good poetry curricula should study to promote.

A comparison of “Confused Feelings” by Kyrah Tate (fourteen years old) to its model, “Mattens” by George Herbert, suggests both a criterion for successful student poems and the value of a model poem in providing an emphatic poetic occasion for the student’s own composition. “Mattens” is about waking up in the morning, stirring to the first light of dawn, and then responding by meditative stages to the morning light until it becomes the divine light of revelation. The poet rises toward it from his bed and into the day:

I cannot open mine eyes,
But thou art ready these to catch
My morning-soul and sacrifice:
Then we must needs for that day make a match.
My God, what is a heart?
Silver, or gold, or precious stone,
Or starre, or rainbow, or a part
Of all these things, or all of them in one?
My God, what is a heart?
That thou shouldst it so eye, and wooe,
Powring upon it all they art,
As if that thou hadst nothing else to do?
Indeed mans whole estate
Amounts (and richly) to serve thee:
He did not heav'n and earth create,
Yet studies them, not him by whom they be.
Teach me they love to know;
That this new light, which now I see,
May both the work and the workman show:
Then by a sunne-beam I will climbe to thee.

High school students, whether or not they have problems with tardiness, are generally very aware of the psychodrama of waking up in the morning. They are quick to talk about how happily easy it is to get out of bed when they have hopes of fun and delight—as on weekends. Conversely, their newly-broadening shoulders feel the weight of how difficult it can be to get out of bed to begin a day of drudgery. High school students are touchingly ready to understand that without hope it could be utterly impossible to get out of bed at all. They are in touch with the “match” or act of existential valor with which we each begin the day. Their various individual awakening experiences are at hand for the classroom teacher. Some are awakened by mother, some by siblings, some by alarm clocks, occasionally one by some stimulus as distinctive as the aroma of breakfast or a pet dog bounding into the room and onto the bed. Many can visualize the progression of what they see as they “open” their eyes. This is an accessible, concrete place to begin. What is the first “thing” each sees or hears? The poetry idea can initiate a line of development, working from thing to thing toward the levels of abstraction that begin the day. The range of the meditative imagination, from concrete particular to profoundly-felt personal insight, is evident in “Confused Feelings”:

I opened my eyes, a strip of light hit my face. I was scared to face the day.

My God, what is it to care for somebody? Why do I care so much for people and they are going to die?

My God, what is it to care for somebody please tell me this is something I am scared and frightened of all the people. I care for are going to die.

God, even though they and I will walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want to be evil to who I care for. All the days of my life and until I die I will ask myself this Question. Why do I care for the people and know that they are going to die?

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me.

YES my child you will go through the valley of the shadow of death and you shall not go hitting people because you are confused. I don't think I could tell you why you think that but when you cry I will be with you all the way up.

Kyrah T. (fourteen)

The success of this poem is due to both its romantic morbidity and its romantic concern with life; its passion is seen in the interplay of these themes; it is an authentic expression of this vital young poet's personality. Its form is both directly mimetic and reflective of an understanding of the form of “Mattens,” promoted by a line-by-line reading of the model poem in class. For example, the repetition of the line “My God, what is a heart?” in the Herbert poem was imagined to be inspired by the experience tossing and turning at the edge of sleep, thinking of something first in one position and then in another, working out an idea or concern, or having a pleasureable image or thought. High school students are quick to recall the recurrent nightmares of childhood; they have outgrown them, but are still close enough to them to feel their horrors afresh and to offer each other possible strategies for overcoming bad dreams, such as becoming conscious of the dream as a dream, considering it from all sides, and refusing to let it take control. The struggle for consciousness can be seen as a struggle against inevitability. “Confused Feelings” invites comparison with “Mattens,” the salient comparisons and contrasts inviting a rereading of the model poem with new intensity within this new and enriched frame of reference. A value common to all such meditative poems is personal growth.

This is an organic kind of poetry idea, nurturing the kind of youthful imagination which William Wordsworth hid

in mind:

How does the meadow flower its bloom unfold?
Because the lovely little flower is free
Down to its roots, and in that freedom, bold. ¹¹

There is nothing simply salubrious about such poetry, however. The roots of such poetry are twisted; the well springs of the imagination come out of conflicts and tensions as well as from harmonies and hopes. “Confused Feelings” is as affirmative of death as it is affirmative of life. The vector from root to blossom, from “confusion” to hope, faith and resolution, which determines the shape of this poem, has its fateful complement in the adolescent imagination in acts of rebellion and denial. Galway Kinnell has remarked that the teenager is “almost gnostic in his dualism;” he is given to high and pious idealism, inspiration and self-sacrifice, and yet also to depression, destruction and disbelief. ¹² The full reach of this twofold *praxis* should be suggested by a poetics of the adolescent imagination. It is quintessentially American to be less than all of a piece with one’s roots—a kind of fragmentation which our current pop psychologies and ethnocentricities ameliorate but cannot mend. Each of these derivative poems is a unifying meditation, modeled on Herbert’s “Mattens,” which brings the student poet’s best strengths to grips with this theme.

Light
I open my eyes and it is bright;
What is it? Through my window it peeks.
It happens every day: light,
As I admire it, it is a spill, a leak,
Dawn of day, it’s daybreak.
I hear a sound, the chirp.
Can it be the little creature, birds,
And in the trees, the shadows and
Wind makes it shake?
A voice of confuaion interrupts my thoughts.
Yells here, noise there and on without a stop.
It’s a crazy maze, a crazy world of mixed-up people.
I battle and then I fight.
Awake I hear the words in my mind,
All of a sudden a silence.
I rise and look out the window and the leak
Is a shine: “Light.”
Helen H. (fourteen)

The soft sound of my mother's voice.
The light coming through the window.
The thoughts of last night.
The thoughts of the day to come.
And the feeling of waking up one more time.
Gerald H. (fifteen)

Ugliness in the Morning

As I stir in the morning, I'm thinking, I'm late, I'm late, Is it time to get up? I give myself five more minutes. I say to myself Oh Gosh I don't feel like getting up. I'm going to stay home today and then I think about all the things I'm gonna miss, and with a quick dash, I run to the bathroom, brush my teeth, take a bath, look in the mirror, and say to myself Oh Carol, What the hell happened to you? Oh well, everybody can't look good in the morning.

Carol S. (sixteen)

Time to Rise

I am awakened by my mother's call.
My eyelids are heavy as I try to open them.
The room is flooded with light from the blazing sun.
I rub my eyes as they adjust to the light of day.
I dread leaving the warmth and comfort of my bed.
My feelings for doing so are all negative.
If new clothes or a special day await me, I am up with such ease.
But on days when nothing awaits me, it is hard, oh so hard, to leave my nest.

Traci H. (seventeen)

I awake to the morning melody of the birds as they chatter over their morning worm.
I look all around me; I see the trees, the familiar room, and the clock.
I look at the time. Oh no. I slept late. Wait. This is Saturday.
I lay on the bed and daydream about things that are going to happen and people I hope to meet.
Then I hear the pitter-patter of tiny bare feet on the kitchen floor and know what's in store for me.
Time to start our game. Shannon comes running in and becomes a trampoline artist using my bed and body as a trampoline.
After this little spurt of exercise she lays besides me as if in deep sleep and then, when she's positive I'm asleep she tickles me. I laugh and get up.
Melina S. (sixteen)

Waking Up

Knock, Knock

Bobby get up, its six o'clock

I open my eyes, barely

wishing it was four o'clock

It seems impossible to even

twitch a muscle in my body

Many thoughts going through my head

(don't get up, so what if you miss one day, you can make up homework tomorrow, school is going to be fun today, just stare and waking up will be easy, you told her you were going to be in school today.)

Knock, Knock

Bobby you up

The music from the radio is telling me keep sleeping

Oh God do I have to get up?

I finally trick myself into putting my feet on the floor, knowing that a full day is ahead of me.

Bob D. (sixteen)

The Morning Poem

When awakening in the morning,

while lying refusing to move or get out of my bed

as the sun creeps into my window, the glare

of the sun brightens up the room.

I lie there, looking at the alarm clock, waiting for it to go off.

I keep it half an hour fast.

I think while I look at it that

I still have some time to rest.

It then goes off, and I am up.

I just get up and go to school.

Bruce O. (fifteen)

Getting Up and Seeing My Sister, Shirell

In the morning when I wake up I see my

sister standing in the mirror dancing.

Even though I'm still in a sleepy mood I can

hear the disco music from the record player.

I see my sister in an active mood, but I still

feel sleepy and want to go back to sleep.

I turn my head toward the pillow and smell

the Hawaiian White Ginger from the bed.

I glance at the clock to make sure it's really day.

In a soft voice I say to my sister, "What do you think you're doing?"

In a loud, but smart voice she replies, "Shut up!"

I stare at her for a moment or so and get out of bed.

Still staring at my sister I walk to the window

to look out to see how the weather is going to be.

Sandra H. (sixteen)

The struggle to get up in the morning is one example of ambivalence toward growth and the alliance of imaginative vitality and resistance to the limits and demands of time, a recurrent theme in poetry ideas that work with adolescents. Comparison-and-contrast is the best means of exploring the relationship between these poems and “Mattens;” but each poem is also, of course, a new poem, very much a rewrite of “Mattens” in terms of what Herbert’s poem means to the student in the light of his own experience. That dimension of reading is essential to any full reading of a poem; that poetry ideas are so ready a means of exploring this relationship is a great argument for them. The writing of poetry closely based on models makes the model poem *material*, objective and at hand, for the writing of a new poem; the derivative composition is both valuable in itself and as a means of partially comprehending the model poem. The complementary principles here are: writers are readers; through writing, the reader gains insight into literature. Reading poetry offers more opportunities for the development of vitality in composition than does the strict study of grammar and rhetoric. Without that vitality, any study of literature is superficial, however analytically exhaustive it may be. Beyond objectives of concrete production and observable skill development, the relationship between the model poem and the derivative of created poems entails both a merging of imaginations and an affirmation of individual being through selection and transformation. While protecting the model poem from aggregations of interpretation by reading and rereading it closely, the teacher must greatly encourage the student to find his own voice as he makes the poetry idea his own; to the degree in which his imitations are slavish, they tend to be facile and boring.

A student is free to find his own voice to the degree in which he can imagine himself and create his own poetic space and time. The encouragement of daydream and reverie to create individual poetic space and time is facilitated by reading of Nikki Giovanni’s *My House*, a book of autobiographical poems which are quite readable to adolescents; here, the imagination does the work of identity. Adolescents are generally still very much in touch with the timelessness of childhood daydreams and fantasies. The first poem in *My House*, “Legacies,” is a retrospective reverie about staying time. It invites both a poetry idea about not wanting to be taught, and classroom discussion about saying “no,” both in the course of growing up and in the middle of a poem:

her grandmother called her from the playground
“yes, ma’am”
“i want chu to learn how to make rolls” said the old
woman proudly
but the little girl didn’t want
to learn how because she knew
even if she couldn’t say it that
that would mean when the old one died she would be less
dependent on her spirit so
she said
“i don’t want to know how to make no rolls”
with her lips poked out
and the old woman wiped her hands on
her apron saying “lord
these children” and neither of them ever
said what they meant
and i guess nobody ever does

The poetry idea based on this poem can be assigned in a number of ways; with freshmen, it has proven profitable simply to assign a three-part poem: In the first part someone asks you to learn something or tries to teach you something; in the second part, you say “no;” and in the third part you finish by explaining why. This is loosely parallel to the form of “Legacies,” the model poem, which has been carefully read in class, line by line. As a poetry idea this tractable form invites recollections which are in the possession of all but the most pliant of personalities. (Even these few left high and dry can be rescued by turning the poetry idea assignment into an occasion of saying “no” to someone—in other words the teacher—who wants them to learn something.) The following poems demonstrate how it is possible for the student poet to speak freely, to affirm his identity, to be himself, within the occasion of a generative poetry idea—even when, as in this instance, it is very difficult for the student to be himself anywhere else:

“O.K.” said the teacher, “Ervin repeat after me.”
“B-I-N-G-O” sang the teacher.
I responded shyly
No, I don’t want to learn the song.
But I knew deep down
I wanted to learn.
Then later on we were singing
in class.
And we got around to Bingo.
The whole class sang
except for me
I felt sad, left out
rejected.
Ervin B. (seventeen)

It is always wrong to use a poem based on a poetry idea to psychologize about an individual student—wrong from the point-of-view of pedagogy if not from that of criticism and psychology. But it is interesting that this

poem, a painful childhood recollection getting to the heart of the problem of shyness, was written by a popular varsity basketball player who was taciturn to the point of withdrawal. There can be no question that, to the poet, this poem represented a belated explanation of himself. Our reading it made him feel—and in fact be—better understood and more at home among us, especially among those of us who saw his silence as hostility or indifference—common misreadings of shyness. As a meditation on a memory, this poem raises the issue of why we recall what we do, and of what we attempt to do with such haunting memories. This poem has, in effect, an implied third stanza that interprets it, that “says what it means,” It implies a resolution against shyness, perhaps as part of the work of growing up. Writing that moralistic third stanza could be a classroom exercise. It would, of course, be tempered by the presence of other student poems which say “no” to learning and growing up:.

I sat on my bed reading a book.
My uncle called me
He said, “Sandra come here I want to teach
you a game.”
I said, “No, I don’t want to learn it.”
I finished reading the book and
lay there on my bed.
I thought about the game and wanted
to say I already know how to play
Then I heard him say in a friendly voice
Young people never want to learn any-
thing new.
Sandra H. (fifteen)

The fine and exemplary irony with which this poem ends is true to the desire to teach. The benevolence of this desire outshines its inappropriateness in a touching way which is analogous to the “proud” nurturance of the

grandmother in "Legacies." Benevolence is felt as a value in itself. In pointed contrast, in the next two poems the poet warns of a teacherly power that can easily become malevolent. The desire not to learn is a reaction to this perversion of power.

One day my brother tried to teach
me Algebra. I didn't understand it;
he saw something logical, all I
saw was letters.

I told him to forget trying because
I didn't want to learn.

Here was something I didn't know.

I hate to be conquered and felt
that, if I tried to understand and
couldn't, it would conquer me.

Melinda A. (sixteen)

Sisters

I dislike her.

She's always mean and picking on me
and telling me things I don't like,
like

"So you think you're a good dancer?"

and

"You get in my way too much,"

One day I didn't know how to do my homework:
algebra.

She said, "I'll help you," and she tried to show me how.

I don't like her.

I had my other sister teach me instead.

Carmen S. (fourteen)

"Weebit, come here please," my mother
cried as I jumped out of the car which
was still running in the parking lot
stall.

I didn't stop, nor did I turn around.

I couldn't convince myself to. The things
she said to me had stunned me in one way
and hurt me in another.

I think, the calling me back was
to say she was sorry. My reaction
surely proved she had said the wrong
thing.

I wanted to turn around and say, "No,
how could you have said those things to me."

And when I did, she was
no longer there and I kept walking.

Patty H. (seventeen)

These poems of self-protection are best read both from life to the poem and through the poem to life. Here one does not experience merely another overtone of the ruminative adolescent chiasmus of despair and sadness crossed by vitality and hope; instead, what these student poets are seeking is a pattern of experience, a basic range of feeling, in the shape of Steven's "central poem" of which the poetry idea engenders multiple reflections. To the degree that mirroring relationship is realized, the student poem is at once a reading of the model poem and a meditative exercise in the reading of poetry. When the student poet experiences that relationship—not didactically, but synoptically and nondiscursively in the act of creation—he arrives at his proper place or stance. The creative act communicates the meaning of our heuristic myth, and we delight in and grow through the work of the imagination. We seem to know best who and what we are when we are being poets, even when—as in Coleridge's "Cristobel"—the vitality of the imagination is not consonant with the simple orders, structures, truisms and demands of life.

Poems which in a Faustian way invite the imagination to such a challenge are more difficult to work as "poetry ideas" for adolescents than one might expect; the teaching of a poem which implies a choice about being requires considerable preparation—but if the risks are great, so are the possible rewards. While teaching poetry ideas always stimulates the writing of autonymous poems by some students, the teaching of a poem like Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 is rather more like fishing than it is like hunting. Don't be surprised by what you get.

Sonnet 130

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground:
 And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
 As any she belid with false compare.

The rigor of this poem must be communicated by teaching it line by line—and, where necessary, word by word. In the first line, the word “mistress” requires definition; that accomplished, the irony of describing her eyes as “nothing like the sun,” or as dull opposed to bright, should be considered. Bright eyes are a sign of intelligence. (“Brighteyes” is one of Athena’s names); dull eyes, besides lacking attractiveness, suggest mental dullness. Consider what it is to begin a love poem with an insult, or, in the slang of the moment, a “cut;” then, move on. In the next line, “coral” will require definition; then discuss what it is to call one’s beloved pale-lipped. (Are pale lips sensual or attractive? Are red lips?) Ask the young women in the class what it would mean to them to be called not-too-bright and not-too-sexy by a boyfriend. Ask the young men whether they would address a girlfriend like that—but beware of the young cad of the treat-em-tough school, whose strategy begs the point of the poem. Here elicit suspense as to what Shakespeare means, and then read on.

The dictionary word in the third line is “dun,”—a dull, boring, nondescript color, probably the color of the tile floors or dingy walls of your institutional setting. At a time (pre-coppertone) when whitest skin was the mark of beauty, what is it to call a beloved’s color “dun?” Another insult. This is an opportunity to introduce an Elizabethan painting, perhaps of the Virgin Queen herself—white pancake make-up and rouge and all—and to consider by inquiry what the present consensus is about her deadly pallor. This is a good place to consider conventions of beauty and fashion, and how they change; this may lead to discussion of whether or not physical beauty is the most important quality in people.

The fourth line is also best read with an Elizabethan portrait or idealized figure painting in hand. Point out that in painting gold wire was actually sometimes worked into the representation of locks of hair. With lines five and six, it should be clear that Shakespeare has mentioned the conventional and painterly *ideal* of beauty in order to show exactly what his *actual* beloved is like—or not like. Here produce an advertisement with an ideally beautiful model and consider how “normal” or even how “real”—as opposed to artificially created by the photographer’s art—such beauty is. When was the last time someone actually saw someone who looks like that in real life?

But the poem saves its most outrageous “cut” for last. As what “reeks” means, and then what it must mean to say her breath “reeks.” Consider whether the poet is serious here. Is this insult too much to believe? Do lovers ever tease each other like this? Responses will vary from student to student, culture to culture. But the point will be made that the poet may be up to something complex, which it might take intelligence (as opposed to “dullness”) to grasp.

The first line of the sestet will support that notion: “I love to hear her speak” says something very important and quite encouraging about their relationship, even though her voice is hardly musical. Discuss the importance of talk in an intimate relationship. If this “cut” is actually a compliment, then the preceding “insults” may also be understood ironically. The turn between octave and sestet that is the secret characteristic of sonnet structure may be diagrammed on the blackboard. Something is happening in the structure of the poem which will reveal the true nature of this relationship, against which each complaint must be read.

The teacher must decide when digression is timely, and when it distracts from the meaning of the poem. Should “damask’d” be looked up in the dictionary? Should the intimation of artifice be noted? Should it be made clear that Damascus is an exotic and, most important, *distant* oriental city? If the nature of good conversation has been an ongoing concern in the class, it might be wise to further discuss the poet’s love of hearing his beloved speak. The introduction of analogous poems is often helpful here. ¹³

The final four lines contain the poem's "point": the idealized beauty is a goddess and, therefore, unearthly and insubstantial. Goddesses live in heaven, in the mind, or in the images of art, but not at hand. His actual mistress is flesh and blood; she "treads on the ground;" she is actually there for him when he needs her. Here again the relationship the poet is describing cannot be grasped on an emotional level unless students are invited to discuss their views and values. How important are those actual relationships we depend upon? How many such relationship does an individual generally have in life? Such questions lead inevitably to the concluding couplet.

There the beloved is extolled as "rare," as precious and unique. Any individual is indeed unique. Here the members of the class are invited to savor their own uniqueness. His beloved is loved for herself. She *believes* the "false compare" of conventionalized "little nothings" of love and, of course, of love poetry. This poem expresses love differently.

She is loved for herself and not for her resemblance to an ideal. Here the class may consider the intention of the poem by answering this question: Do you want to be loved for yourself—flaws and all—or do you want to be loved because you conform to a convention or ideal? Each student should also weigh this matter individually.

Do not expect that every student will elect selfhood over idealization. Some may have just discovered the power of mascara or of after-shave. Some may feel that the damage has already been done by the fatal factuality of the octet, and that no final flattery can make up for such insults. But many will now express the desire to be loved for who they are. A choice may be presented: Would you rather receive Hallmark valentine card or this poem? A spontaneous discussion, or even a formal debate, will help to bring out students' responses to the poem.

Again, the poetry idea based on this poem can be assigned in a variety of ways. A basic method follows: the teacher should ask for a list of six or eight ways in which one's beloved is less than perfect or the relationship less than ideal. Later, the student should explain why he loves his beloved or why the relationship is an enduring one. The following three poems indicate something of the range of what one must be ready to expect:

My Friend
My friend isn't like Miss America.
Her looks aren't like Cover Girl.
Her words aren't always of the truth . . .
She speaks of others that she dislikes in a nasty way.
But still she speaks of others' social life;
Yet I like her . . .
She tries to understand through actions instead of words.
She's there to make you happy when you're sad . . .
I like her for just being herself;
No matter how bad her faults are . . .
She's still my friend.
Sandra H. (sixteen)

For What He Is

My boyfriend's eyes are like a coal mine.

His arms are like the limbs
of a tree.

His face is not of a prince.

His nose is not perfect.

But honestly I love him for what he
is, not for what I want him
to be.

His body is not like the Hulk.

His speaking is not like a whisper

But who cares, that's not really
what I want, cause he is all
that I got.

Billie Joe J. (fourteen)

Spiral

I just wanted you to know you're being thought

of. Each time I have something that must be
done it's interrupted by a gentle thought of you.

Thoughts of our old conversations, feelings, problems,
good times.

I don't know why I used the word "old." Every
thing seems to be reborn or restored through
these intimate thoughts.

They take me through a spiral that's not only light and full with movement but suddenly gets heavy and comes to a dead stop. The movement involves dizziness but the stop includes loneliness. You see at the end of this spiral there's an opening, large enough for one and one only. You were the fortunate one. I've been left behind to whirl about. When will I stop spinning? I can never tell. I have been spinning and I have been to that little opening, which never seemed to be my friend. It never wanted to let me out and I don't think it will. Each time I turn around or to my side I see images of all the things I want, wished for and love go through that opening leaving me alone hurt and feeling sorry for myself. Then I sit and wait until something else gets captured and try to make the best of things. Well this time around this won't happen. I'm tired of seeing things snatched right out of my reach forever. I'll fix that little opening that won't give me what I want. If I can't get nothing else will come in. I'll block that opening and enclose myself. That way I won't be victimized or teased. I'm not gonna let that spiral keep me here. it's just being selfish. So I'm gonna do what I was told not to. I remember being told to just relax and take things as they come and never fight the forces, and most important: Never stop things from entering or leaving. But I am . . . I'll close up and we'll both self-destruct. The line you just read speaks of my love, my heart and myself. The spiral is my heart. The opening is my heart that has been broken. The objects seeking their way out are people who are either running away from me or my love that's no longer wanted. The gap in which I sealed myself is myself denying another to destroy all the

things I want.

Now my heart is open to all, and I
sincerely hope it's never captured again.

Patty H. (seventeen)

It is essential to make copies of student poems for distribution. Posting poems alongside their models makes both of them immediately available parts of the classroom environment. Each poem stands as an example of interpretation through the device of the poetry idea. Each example, whether trivial or monumental, is an invitation to take the reading and writing of poetry to heart, and an exercise and an invitation for the adolescent struggling for selfhood to return to writing.

Appendix

The two following concrete poems, the first from Emmett Williams' *Anthology of Concrete Poetry* and the second an adaptation for purposes of comparison and contrast in the classroom, are examples of analagous material that may be introduced to create a frame of reference for the sonnet. ¹⁴The nature of talk and of good conversation is, particularly for the Television Generation, worth speculating upon. Experience has shown that there is no need to translate these poems for the class; the poems may be presented in Italian, then puzzled out word by word. (Spanish-speaking students are invaluable here.) Once a setting is provided (dim lights, red wine, checkered red-and-white tablecloth, *bel canto* on the stereo) the class may be asked, simply, which poem would they title "Marriage," and which "Divorce?" The ensuing discussion is likely to yield realizations about the place of talk in relationships, which will encourage an understanding of Shakespeare's "I love to hear her speak."

1 voce

2 voci

1 dialogo

silenzio

sogno

sonno

amore

(Carlo Belloli (1951)

Emmet Williams, *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* [unpaginated])

dialogo

dialogo

dialogo

dialogo

dialogo

dialogo

amore

(Authors adaptation)

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2. *Language and Writing* , Vo1.1 (Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, 1978), p. 67.3. The Fate of Reading, p. viii.
4. The Poetics of Reverie, pp. 154-158.
5. Justin George Lawler, *Celestial Pantomine* , p. 3.
6. *The New York Times* April 8, 1979, p. 48.
7. *The Anxiety of Influence* , p. 24.
8. *The New York Times*, July 29, 1970, Section E, p. 19.
9. *Wishes, Lies and Dreams* , p. 43.
10. *The Rule of Metaphor* , p. 54.
11. "A Poet! He Hath Put His Heart to School"
12. *Interviews* , p. 141.
13. See Appendix.
14. Pages unnumbered: alphabetical order.

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