The Trying

Reading back recently through T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, I was startled to discover to what a remarkable extent these poems paradoxically embody an eloquent meditation on the difficulties of composition. Look, for example, at these lines from "East Coker":

*Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt / Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure / Because one has only learnt to get the better of words / For the thing one no longer has to say, / or the way in which / One is no longer disposed to say it.*

How well Eliot captures, in how few words, the struggle to get anything said or written well, indeed to get anything said or written at all. Yet how surprising as well that one of the major poets of the twentieth century should be meditating on such matters so late in his distinguished poetic career.

Eliot is, of course, a major poet. His difficulties may seem, therefore, to have little to do with those of our students, or even with our own struggles as writers and teachers of writing. Our own and our students' problems are quite different from those of such an accomplished author, you might protest, and in some ways, of course, they are. But how different? It is difficult to write at all. Whether the struggle proves greater if you are T.S. Eliot, so fully in touch with language as to be painfully aware of its inadequacy as a medium of expression; a student writer being put painfully in touch with your own seeming inadequacy as a writer, reader, and thinker; or a teacher of writing, caught somewhere in the middle, remains an open question.

As teachers of writing, we tend to assume that a great gulf separates the writing we read for pleasure and edification from the typical products of an average composition class, which we assume must be marked, corrected, and graded rather than savored and explored. But how great is the distance between working writers and struggling students, between those student efforts at communication and expression we are so inclined to criticize and those memorable texts that constitute the "literature" we are so inclined to prize? Where do we—as writers and teachers and readers and critics—stand in relation on the one hand to those texts that enrich our lives, and on the other to the sort of student essay about which we are inclined to say, as Eliot says about his own lines in "East Coker": "That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory."?

*Invested in Language*

The differences are, presumably, fairly obvious. Great writers, and those aspiring to be great, generally write in the informing if sometimes crippling context of what has already been done and said, as Eliot made clear in his celebrated essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." They are well-read and thoroughly invested in language, they have things to say, and they are bent on getting things written despite the obstacles—or perhaps because of them. Great writers persist in this struggle in order to use language as well as they possibly can, no matter how hard it proves or how long it takes.

Our students, by contrast, often come into our classes ill-read and little interested in language as such, feeling they may have things to say but perhaps very little to write. They struggle to understand what we want from them, and to be understood when they try to provide it. Like us, they want to have their efforts appreciated—perhaps even, in the best of cases, admired. They face, however, not only time and grade pressures but all sorts of other obstacles and distractions besides.

And here we all are somewhere in the middle: reasonably well-read, invested in but perhaps less than expert with language, able to appreciate the sometimes painful distance between our own writing and "great" writing, and endeavoring to have our students first recognize that distance in the case of their own writing and then work toward bridging the gap.

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Yet if such differences are real enough, so also are the similarities. Does the act of writing not often seem to us and to our students, as Eliot puts it in "East Coker," "an intolerable wrestle with words and meanings"? In "Burnt Norton," Eliot describes the myriad ways in which language manages to elude our designs upon it:

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.

Surely all of us who have struggled to express ourselves or communicate with others through the medium of a sheet of paper have experienced this same combination of tension, frustration, imprecision, and decay.

Certainly our students must often hear "shrieking voices / Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering, / . . . assail them" ("Burnt Norton") as they gaze at the marks we have made on and read (or don't read) the remarks we have made about their essays, those collections of their words that sometimes seem to us to "decay with imprecision." Getting back essay after essay with suggestions and corrections, students must feel along with Eliot that "every attempt / Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure." Or, as our courses draw to a close, that "one has only learnt to get the better of words / For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which / One is no longer disposed to say it."

To "Essay"

Yet to "essay" is, of course, to try. Our own and our students' attempts to bring their writing closer to great writing, or merely up to the level of our own more or less good writing, may sometimes strike us as a frustrating--perhaps even, in our most discouraged moments, an impossible--task. Yet this is, in the end, the real function of a writing class: not to make our students write like T. S. Eliot or Adrienne Rich or Joan Didion or John McPhee, but to assist their own effort to write better at the end of our courses than they do at the beginning.

Despite our best efforts, and theirs, we may never bring these students to produce--and may never ourselves succeed in producing--the sort of writing

where every word is at home,
Taking its place to support the others,
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
An easy commerce of the old and the new,
The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic,
The complete consort dancing together.
("Little Gidding")

How crucial, then, to remember--and to remind our students--that Eliot, in his crowning poetic achievement, is describing not the experience of taking or teaching a composition course but the lifelong struggle of a major poet to say what he means and to mean what he says, a struggle we each of us imitate in some form every time we try to write, whether as students, teachers, or professional writers.

As Eliot observes in "East Coker,"

each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion . . .

This may not be particularly comforting information for our composition students to receive, but they have a right to know that even Nobel Prize-winning poets have such problems. They also have a right to feel, as Eliot goes on to insist, that "for us, there is only the trying; the rest is not our business." We may not ever ourselves write--or teach our students to write--like Eliot or Rich or Didion or McPhee or the many other fine writers whose words absorb the eye and ring in the mind. But we can try. And try again. We can try.

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