Richard Gillin

The Facts and Nothing but the Facts:
Using Objective Writing in the Teaching of Poetry

Freud’s mentor, M. Charcot, stated that “the greatest satisfaction a man could have was to see something new—that is, to recognize it as new,” and he stressed the importance of looking at the apparent commonplace and “the difficulty and value of this kind of ‘seeing’” (Freud, 1989, p. 50). He could have been a poet or a literary critic instead of a physician. To discover new levels of seeing a poem, particularly a very familiar poem, is one of the special delights in studying poetry, and one of the more difficult things to teach since so much seems to depend on flashes of individual insight. While nothing can replace or guarantee creative imagination, the use of objective writing, I have found, can sensititize students to the special nuances of poetry ordinarily overlooked.

During the fall term at my college, freshman students are required to study poetry and drama. After several weeks of discussions, I have often found that a general pattern emerges with regard to the kind of questions that arise in class, and how those questions are answered. Basically, students look for an “answer” to a poem under study. They tend to connect it structurally or, more commonly, thematically with other poems we have studied. On the whole, they grasp the primary intent of the poet fairly well, but they leave much unexplored, and there is some willingness to ignore a wide range of other possibilities. A reasonable reading of the poem in their minds seems to be preferable to making things more complicated and somewhat uncertain. How to get students motivated on their own to consider what initially appear to be unlikely directions, or to see the commonplace as if it were new, has been a strong concern of mine.

A former student of mine, who is now a technical writer, was chiding me about how students are channelled into a “literary” approach to language. Students write around facts, in this “literary” framework, by stressing their emotions, and they embellish their prose with allusions that have imaginative and sensual appeal. Too often, this sort of writing moves away from what is even suggested in a poem. Technical writers, he explained, are admonished not to get “literary”; they are asked to present information objectively, accurately, and without analysis or explanation. He challenged me to have my students write with the special kind of precision of a technical writer. The gap between the emotional aridity of technical writing and the rich associativeness of poetry seemed fertile for experimentation in writing. My concern about what I already saw as my students’ tendency to reach for generalizations was excited by his challenge, though I felt the special sense of fear typical of English teachers, a fear that perhaps “literary” writing was somehow less valuable.

Toward the middle of the fall term, I developed an assignment which placed emphasis on objective writing. Included was a special focus on transitions as a way of encouraging students to give greater attention to specific details. I talked about the need to be as objective and factual as possible, and I emphasized the need for precision and accuracy.

Writing Assignment
Your next essay will require you to work on objective exposition. I want you to work with Dylan Thomas’s poem, “Fern Hill.” Read the text carefully and work toward a clear understanding of what is actually going on in the poem itself. Begin your writing with a stanza by stanza outline in prose. Then refine your prose outline into very concise paragraphs. Make every stanza a paragraph. Account for everything in each stanza in as little space as possible, and pay very close attention to how transitions function.

Your finished piece should render the poem in clear, concise, and objective prose. Keep your personal views and emotions out of your writing. Particular emphasis should be given to the way each stanza is unified and linked to the next.

During the two weeks following the assignment, I met frequently with students to talk about the poem, their initial drafts, and their final drafts. There was some resistance to writing objectively at first; students argued that writing without emotion or color was useless and, furthermore, hard. As draft succeeded draft, however, the rigidity of the assignment’s demands became more of a tantalizing challenge, and the students became engrossed in Thomas’ world. Invariably, questions about “Fern Hill” entered into class discussions, and I found students who earlier in the course would accept almost any reasonable interpretation of a poem arguing about the importance of transitions. These students showed, among other things, why it
was significant that Thomas controls the sense of time so carefully in the poem. More importantly, the students were paying very close attention to nuances in the poem which made their reading of the poem, and our class discussions, far richer and more stimulating. Here is stanza one of the poem (Thomas, 1957, p. 178):

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs About the botter house and happy as the grass was green, The night about the dingle starry, Time let me hail and climb Golden in the hejdays of his eyes, And honored among weasons I was prince of the apple towns And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves Trail with daisies and barley Down the rivers of windfall light.

By looking at examples of how one student moved from draft to draft, it is possible to see how her writing became more objective and how her understanding of the poem’s amplitude developed. Here is the first draft of her initial paragraph, treating the first stanza:

Draft One
There exists for the speaker, in his vigorous youth, an inseparable bond with nature. This bond is based on the speaker’s innocence which is maintained by his position “under the apple boughs” and his unawareness of the passage of time. The apples, symbolizing corruptive knowledge, are beyond reach, and time in correlation with nature is considered a benevolent aspect of life, “Time let me hail and climb, Golden in the hejdays of his eyes.” Control is in his youthful grip and the reins of his perception control his world. The speaker, like Hamlet, before the marriage of his mother to his uncle, is “prince of the apple towns.” In all this glory, he is unaware of the subtle changes in himself and the world around him that will ultimately alter his relationship with nature.

While this first draft suggests an interesting reading of the poem, it is laden with value judgments, allusions outside the poem itself, and emotions. The final goal of the assignment is solid ground for an imaginative and creative interpretation, but without a clear sense of what is actually in, or suggested in, the poem, a valid interpretation is not possible. To reach the stage of perceptive insight in which the reader is free to connect a myriad of possible suggestions, the tendency to interpret aspects of the poem spontaneously, from a source of self-derived stock responses, needs to be controlled. Having to limit commentary only to what can be shown to be in the poem itself helps to develop a sense of the poem’s own demands. Understanding the poet’s unique vision comes after the reader puts aside his own preconceptions. Draft one shows that the student is not ready yet to get to the creatively interpretive stage. References to “an inseparable bond with nature,” apples “symbolizing corruptive knowledge,” and the speaker’s similarity to Hamlet are superficially interpretative, not grounded in fact, and at this stage of writing, not admissible. In the second draft, a closer analysis of the poem is evident, as well as a tendency to be more concise:

Draft Two
In the poem, “Fern Hill,” the speaker is a man reflecting on how the meaning of time seems to have changed for him. In his younger years, the man seemed to float below time. It did not affect him. He was in control of his world, and his time. However, as the man grew up, he began to notice that although time was ageless, he was not. Time could rejuvenate itself through the beginning of a new day, or a new season, or a new year. The man came to the realization that he could not rejuvenate himself as time could; rather, he was at the mercy of time.

The ideas related to time are clever and insightful here, but there are many details left out and unaccounted for, details which give the poem important depth. This draft has the virtue of brevity and it is more objective than draft one, but it does not capture the range of stanza one and there is little emphasis on transitions and their function. My advice to the student was to stress the appearance and function of transitions, and to capture Thomas’ key images and ideas related to time.

Draft Three
Now the speaker is comfortable in his youth; he is able to frolic about the countryside of Wales, delighting in nature and the fact that his whole life is before him. He may enjoy freely the apple trees, the green grass, that stars inhabit the heavens above him, without having to worry about his future, without having to develop his character, for he has everything he needs. He can live for each moment, and his world of ruling apple towns and presiding over the trees and leaves has no bounds. Here he is able to govern the daisy boats traveling down rivers of sunlight or simply lounge drowsily beneath branches. His ambition lies only in this world which he has constructed for himself, and he need not listen to those in the world which is now foreign to him, for he is young and carefree. In this young and carefree world, time is an unknown stranger, a stranger which he does not care about, nor does he wish to ever learn to know.

This last revision shows a much closer and more objective reading of the first stanza. Emphasis on key words illustrates the subtle shifts of attention, mood, and perception on the part of the speaker; there is little evidence of forcing elements in the poem into a preconceived notion of what ought to be according to the student’s initial and perhaps superficial impressions. Though it can be argued that no reading of a poem is
ever totally objective, the attempt to recognize the "otherness" of the artist's vision is a very large first step to understanding the uniqueness of a fine poem. By rendering the speaker's consciousness objectively, the student shows richer connections among particular elements: the world of the poem, time, and unique freedom. In addition, while being fairly concise, the student's language is illustrative of order and precision as she gains control over her own ideas. The assertiveness of the poem as a work of art and the student's creative response mesh in an act of understanding and statement.

When I once again saw my former student, the technical writer, I told him of the results of my experiment in objective writing. Discovery of the specific uses of objective writing transformed my student's attitude toward literature and poetry in particular. Raw impressions were no longer acceptable unless they could be shown to have a direct relationship to objective elements in the poem itself, the special role of the speaker became the first order of attention, and the subtle suggestive power of transitions were investigated sensitively. The irony of going far away from "literary" writing to become sensitized to poetry, and writing about it, was not lost. Confident, once again, that "literary" writing does have special value, I use objective writing with vigor as a means to create the groundwork for writing about literature itself.

References

Richard Gillin is Professor of English at Washington College, Chestertown, Maryland. Since 1984 he has been Coordinator of the Eastern Shore site of the Maryland Writing Project.

Computer-Based Resources for English/Language Arts

The South Coast Writing Project (SCWriP) serves as the liaison between the California Technology Project and the California Writing Project and is developing and disseminating materials to California Writing Project sites to encourage and facilitate the inclusion of technology training into Writing Project institutes and inservice activities. The materials listed below are available from SCWriP at cost (including shipping). No purchase orders can be accepted unless accompanied by a check made out to the Regents of the University of California.


HyperShelf. A collection of writing-activity stacks for use with HyperCard (v. 1.2.2). Item Code: HS ($10.00).


Video: A HyperCard Project for English/Language Arts. Overview, stack demonstrations, and interviews with teachers taking part in a project supported by Apple Computer's Office of Educator Training (36 minutes; VHS format). Item Code: VDO ($20.00).

CUF-Links. Collection of one-page newsletters for Writing Project teachers. Item Code: CL ($2.00).

Send orders and inquiries to Stephen Marcus, Associate Director, South Coast Writing Project, Graduate School of Education, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106, or phone (805) 961-4422.

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