Answering Back: Thoughts on Reading and Writing in the Literature Classroom

by Christine Perrin, Messiah College

Growing up, I was fortunate to have parents who liked language and who recited poems, quotes, and phrases in different languages to me as a matter of course. This, along with the tradition of reading Scripture aloud and memorizing it, gave me an early sense of the pleasure and power of language, but also the instinct that it was there to live with, to engage, to use. Another early memory is of my parents speaking French when they wanted to exclude me from their conversation. They weren't particularly fluent so I knew instantly why these conversations were underway and could usually intuit my way to knowledge—perhaps we were going to read another book before bed or have an unexpected treat. I loved the play of their voices and the sense of possibility which entered the room on those beautiful liquid sounds. I attended the local public school in all of the many places we lived during my formative years and I always loved language arts, reading, and English classes. In tenth grade I slept over at a friend's house and couldn't sleep, so spent the night reading her commonplace book. She wouldn't have called it that at the time but it was a map of her delights as a reader. She was an expert field hockey player who went on to become a nurse, and we never really discussed literature together but that night my heart leapt in response to her cartography. For the first time, I wanted to respond in kind—to answer words with words. Conversing with other people's language is the highest form of reading, be it a critical response (an essay) or a creative response (a poem or story). Polymath and literary critic George Steiner (read *Real Presences*) believes that the best critical response to a literary work is creative—write a story that includes your way of seeing the world, that revises the one you have read, he urges. He sees Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* as such a response to Eliot's *Middlemarch*. While we cannot all play Tolstoy to Eliot, writing in response to reading that has captured our imaginations is a useful and delightful classroom habit.

When I teach the classic American poets such as Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman (Robert Frost, Langston Hughes, William Carlos Williams too), we spend time reading the poetry aloud, studying closely a handful of their poems, investigating their biography, making a list of characteristic gestures and traits, and writing poems that employ aspects of the writer's own style and content interests. We talk about the fact that there is a spectrum of reading: on the lowest end of the reading spectrum is speed reading or skimming in the midst of noise, distraction, and technology (cell phone, facebook, etc.). On the other end stands writing in full engagement—in conversation, if you will—with the writer, using all the knowledge and skill that he or she has shared with you, their reader, to answer back. The history of literature takes this shape: writers responding in love, hate, euphoria, angst to their predecessors and writing or rewriting their work. This is the reason that we call literature the "great conversation" and the reason that we have such awe for those, such as Homer, who began it seemingly *ex nihilo*. But even Homer, as an epic poet, was more of a scribe writing down the long-told song-stories of his tribe. The most compelling compliment I have ever received in a review of my text *Art of Poetry* was that it felt like I was introducing readers to my friends, the poems. Likewise, the writers of those poems have become companions for me; their difficult lives, their particular nature worked out in words, lines, and images are prized possessions that instruct, delight, encourage, and sober me. Most of the living poets that I know write as readers responding to their beloved dead brothers and sisters. Most of the

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readers I know are looking for language adequate to experience, for companionship on life's way, for access to thoughts and minds different from their own.

To foster this engagement in your student's lives you have to get close to the work at hand. I recommend beginning with reading aloud which allows the language to play through the instrument of the body and aids us in encountering it the way in which we were made to hear it. Literary language in general, and poetry in particular, engages the senses and we must honor that in our practice of it. Teach students how to read aloud, show them how to savor the words, use the silences between stanzas, finish the sentences according to their syntactical integrity. If they are reading Langston Hughes' poem *Harlem* which ends on the word "explode" don't let them say it without some form of emphasis. Read the poems closely, take time with them. Poetry makes us slow down; rapidity does not yield "results." Poetry challenges our American value system of pragmatism, speed, money. Teach them to support their interpretation and encourage multiple interpretations as long as they are supported with particulars that make sense (beginning with the elements of the poem, moving on to knowledge of that writer's body of work and of the period, etc.). Even after you have exhausted the poem's reading, refer back to lines, phrases, and images that you have studied in class as a way of understanding something complex compactly, and as a private classroom language. Have students keep commonplace books that copy down important poems, phrases, words, images. Keep one yourself! Take some time to read them to each other (preferably with tea). Have a reading at the end of a unit or semester where each student performs a poem that has influenced him and a poem he has written in response to the influence.

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Writing and reading are skills that acquire layers the longer you practice them. As teachers, we have to be developing in our relationship to these skills if we want to help our students to acquire them. We have to be human next to them. Reading literature is a great leveling tool because all of us are human, all of us approach the text with our own experience in our hand and heart interrogating the experience of the human being speaking to us about life. When Dickinson describes remorse as "Memory—awake—" and "cureless" and "The Adequate of Hell," we have to ask ourselves if this squares with our experience; we have to peer into the cave of our experiences and remember our own moments of remorse. In the same poem (744) she suggests that remorse is God's institution—that He uses it in our lives with a purpose. What a fascinating discussion this demands from us to do justice to the poem. She links the feeling of deep regret to a picture of our blighted past being lighted with a match, burning whenever we return to look at it. When I read this poem, I say *yes, that's it*; my pain at my failure is not an isolated experience, it is one we share. With this knowledge I am more prone to empathy. "Be kind, everyone is fighting a great battle," is a quotation that attends my experience of the poem. But the poem is an experience of remorse, not just a reference to it. That's the nature of poetry and reading it—we dwell in the moment with the poet's voice in our ear and mouth and our hearts astir.

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Remorse—is Memory—awake

by Emily Dickinson

Remorse–is Memory–awake–
Her Parties all astir–
A Presence of Departed Acts–
At window–and at Door–

Its Past–set down before the Soul
And lighted with a Match–
Perusal–to facilitate–
And help Belief to stretch–

Remorse is cureless–the Disease
Not even God–can heal–
For 'tis His institution–and
The Adequate of Hell–