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Talking Back With The Text

Terry Blackhawk

According to the late poet William Stafford (1986) “an artist is someone who lets the material talk back” (21), that is, someone who is engaged in a process so dynamic that the work being created seems to take on a life of its own. This notion, which seemed intuitively correct to me as I began several years ago writing poetry myself became the informing concept of my dissertation research into student writing processes. I wanted to discover in what ways student poets experience this “talking back” with their poems.

I worked with talented twelfth graders for whom text is anything but the static, get-it-over-with entity we so frequently encounter among unskilled or apprehensive writers. These students were flexible and experimental. They engaged in lengthy contemplation of their poems and followed leads suggested by language and imagery. It may seem paradoxical that flexibility leads to control, but this seems to be a hallmark of skillful writers who are willing to delay closure until the best meaning emerges. Berthoff (1981) suggests that beginning writers are unable to tolerate ambiguities or what I. A. Richards calls “the hinges of thought.” “Learning to write,” she explains, “is a matter of learning that the making of meaning is a dialectical process” (71). Poets extend this notion of dancing “on the hinges of thought.” Poetic technique “is mostly a matter of

avoiding whatever commits the poem to behaving in a predictable way” (Turner 12).

To discover the techniques student poets use to jump the tracks of conventional thinking, I interviewed them about poems written specifically for the study. When the poems were finished, I conducted a “Draft Interview” in which I asked the student to read the poem aloud and then “talk me through it” line by line. Questions, which I’ve since come to rely on in conferencing with student poets, included:

1. How did you start this poem?
2. Was there a particular experience behind the poem?
3. As you wrote these lines what were you thinking about?
4. Is there a setting of the poem?
5. What governed your choice of pronouns?
6. What overall feeling does the poem give you?
7. Is there more you’d like to say about the poem?
8. Do you feel the poem is finished? Why or why not?

After I analyzed each poem and its revisions, I conducted a “Final Interview” where I asked about revisions, themes, patterns of imagery, and associations. But I also found myself listening for intimations of the dream state, argument with

self and text, a receptivity to language, and a sense that the process was somehow larger than its creator.

Farah & Sarah

Like many poets, the students started their poems arbitrarily. Each student used terms such as “unconscious” or “subconscious” to describe the ways she developed her poem, yet each poem arrives at complex and unified meanings and converges with Hugo’s (1979) description of a poem’s origins and outcomes.

A poem can be said to have two subjects, the initiating or triggering subject, which starts the poem or “causes” the poem to be written, and the real or generated subject, which the poem comes to say or mean, and which is generated or discovered in the poem during the writing. (4)

Farah’s first line—“I wish you were a brown stone handle”—was written during a math class as she daydreamed “all kinds of weird images.” With its giddy, surrealistic wishes for unity with a lover and its final command, “Touch me,” “LoVe PoEm” creates a tension between childish and adult desires. Oddly possessive, it seeks communication; yet, at the only point when the two are “people together,” they are hieroglyphic figures, frozen in time, who communicate, oxymoronically, in “geometric messages.” The image of the question mark itself is a contradiction, “sleek and fleshy,” with the sensual qualities the speaker desires; yet, “it’s this hybrid thing, like between a person and between a two-dimensional printed thing on the page.” Even the upper and lower case letters in the title convey this “hybrid” quality.

(See drafts 1 & 7 of Farah’s poem in the appendix)

Certain strands of imagery grew from one draft to the next. The poem’s first draft contained no adult references, but with the substitution of “forgotten confetti” (which suggested New Year’s Eve) for “specks of dust,” Farah pursued this imagery:

Draft 2: forgotten confetti

Draft 3: drink sentences with maraschino cherries

Draft 4: lost confetti, champagne rain, wine-glass

Draft 5: diamonds glittering, crumpets, pate, syrupy word

Draft 6: fermented word

Childhood imagery first appeared in Draft 1: “wear you like a charm,” “little brown Egyptian girl,” “childhood forest.” In Draft 3 the charm became an overcoat because overcoats are “more protective.” By Draft 4 the coat gained red buttons and the color yellow which imply a child’s raincoat. The raincoat also connects with the poem’s water references:

Draft 1: tasty drops of thin misty rain

Draft 3: drink your sentences

Draft 4: splashing bucket, well, drops of champagne rain, wineglass, yellow overcoat

Draft 5: you are a well, syrupy word

Draft 6: splashing up, echoing wet, fermented word

Central to the poem’s use of water was the well—an image, discovered in Draft 4, which constituted the major struggle in the poem. Drafts 3 through 6 show her revising this image:

Draft 3: I wish you were a brown stone handle
with some light blue painted metal
part
I wish I could turn you around and
around
and feel the dull flatness of you
against the palm of my hand

Draft 4: I wish you were a brown stone handle
with some light blue painted metal
part
Then I would turn you around and
around

and feel the heaviness of the splashing bucket
ascending up from (your heart) the well.

Draft 5: Today you are a mossy well
and I'm watching my face
unbecome itself in you
with each wishing penny

Draft 6: I wish you were a brown stone handle
with some light blue painted metal part
Then I would turn you around and around
and feel the heaviness of the ascending bucket
splashing up from the echoing wet

Farah liked the notion that looking into a well/water/mirror could be like looking into another person:

That seems like the most meaningful image that I could put in. But it didn't happen....If you're wishing someone would be a well and you're looking inside, then the water in the well is that thing, and that's the metaphor for you, and you're seeing your reflection in that.

But the well analogy "didn't achieve itself," and she dropped it. She scratched out "(your heart) the well" immediately on Draft 4 because "it was so glaring it disgusted me." Farah puzzled over how much detail to include. "I could write for hours about what [the well] would feel like and smell like and what's down there." She was struggling with how subtle it should be:

I sort of went crazy like wanting to describe all of the feelings in the rope, pulling the rope up and having you know, like water, how it shifts, stuff like that.

A final reason for curtailing this image was not to throw off the balance of the poem. "If you see that each little scene is not more than a couple of lines, it would be...really unbalanced." Farah loved the metaphor, but refrained from using it. Her final draft retained the handle, letting the heavy, splashing bucket imply the well-like setting. Yet this choice brought a sense of resigna-

tion. "I thought it might be better to say 'today you are a well' but I couldn't do it. I had to go back to that stupid handle."

Farah made fifty-nine revisions to her poem, over half of which were substitutions to adjust rhythm, refine phrasing, or pursue associations. While she made major efforts to revise the beginning of her poem, its overall sequence was established by the first draft. Sarah's final poem, on the other hand, bore little resemblance to her initial writing.

Like "LoVe PoEm," "Strange Evolution" began with an arbitrary first line—a line she dreamed ("the snow loves you because you are beautiful"). The first draft was simply an exploration of this image, although the theme presented itself: love physical beauty, dark and light, motion and playfulness, settling down. The draft contains phrases which Sarah maintained throughout: "because you are beautiful," "your blackened hair," "the plaid of your wool coat," "light and airy," "snowy...sleep."

(See Sarah's exploratory draft in the appendix)

A major discovery in Sarah's second draft was "just like in the movies," a phrase derived from associating falling snow with stars which reminded her of "Star Trek." Two days elapsed after she wrote "just like in the movies." When she returned to the draft, she reflected upon this idea with two arguments: conditionality ("But if this were the movies") followed by negation ("But this is not a movie"). This snow/star/movie connection reveals how words themselves lead to meaning. As she observed in her interview, "a line comes from a word." The word represents a starting point for Sarah, and in this poem "snow" generated several themes. Falling snow led to stars whizzing by, "Star Trek," hence "movie star," and "just like in the movies." The theme of perception/reality/illusion is enhanced by these connections; as movies suggest screens which can disguise as well as reveal. But snow also led Sarah to consider responsibility, and a giddy whirling beauty became replaced by a more sober view of what is "cold and dark and wet." That Sarah was far from closure on this draft is re-

flected in a marginal comment she wrote to herself: "What am I trying to say?"

In Draft 3 she chose her first line and added "and hold our eyes in a fixed gaze," as well as the poem's ending—"we too must cease our frolicking/ drudging onward, to more temperate regions"—which resolves conflicts between youth and responsibility, beauty and dreariness. Just as several days passed before she pursued the notion of movies in Draft 2, Sarah's final stanza in Draft 3 was written after a lapse of several days. During this time she had been asking herself, "What's my point? And I mulled over it for quite a few days." When she finally wrote the conclusion (on her third sitting with Draft 3), her handwriting changed from manuscript to cursive and she did none of the overwriting or testing of alternatives typical of earlier drafts. Her handwriting has a definite "all-at-once" quality, revealing, as she explained, "when I'm really rushing to get everything out, my handwriting goes into cursive."

In Draft 4 Sarah began to arrange stanzas. Stanza 3 now ends with "because you are beautiful" from her dream. The last stanza of Draft 3 becomes divided in two, with the new fourth stanza ending with another favorite line: "or offend this nature with disregard."

Draft 3: but this is not the movies
and in our subtle reality
we do not kiss
or offend this nature with our disregard
for it is cold and dark and wet
and just as the snow rests and settles
in the hollows of trees
and in the plaid of your wool coat
we too must rest and cease our frolicking
drudging onward, to more temperate regions.

Draft 4: But this silvery screen is our subtle reality
and we do not kiss
or offend this nature with disregard.

For it is cold and dark and wet

and just as the snow rests and settles
in the hollows of trees and the plaid
of your wool coat
we too must cease our frolicking,
the earthly fall of our youth
and drudge onward, to more temperate climates.

In Draft 4, she adds the pun "silvery screen" and arrives at the penultimate line—"the earthly fall of our youth." By Draft 5, the poem required only three changes: the title, "Strange Evolution"; inserting "only" ("But this silvery screen is **only** our subtle reality") to tone down a "loud, glaring statement"; and changing "drudge" to "travel" because "drudge" contradicted the poem's "light and airy" tone.

STRANGE EVOLUTION

You are a flurry of white against the midnight sky
blackened hair and brunette brows disguised
behind winter's hazy night
in this snowy powder of sleep.

In this, we run and skip,
spinning with outstretched arms
as if we were falling in space,
the falling snow like stars whizzing by,
just like in the movies.

And if this were a movie
here we would hold our eyes in a fixed gaze
and fill the screen with our kisses
and I and the snow would shower over you
light and airy,
because you are beautiful.

But this silvery screen is only our subtle reality
and we do not kiss
or offend this nature with disregard.

For it is cold and dark and wet
and just as the snow rests and settles
in the hollows of trees and the plaid of your wool coat
we too must cease our frolicking,
the earthly fall of our youth
and travel onward, to more temperate climates.

Sarah repeatedly expressed concern for “the precise wording, narrowing it down and pinpointing each word to make each word sound as it should be.” Multiple “fine tunings” or adjustments are required to achieve the best combinations. She described overwriting or listing possibilities of words to sort through ideas and “find the rhythm, which combination of words works best.” In Draft 3, her attempt to describe the floating feeling of falling snow went through the following changes:

spinning with outstretched arms
as if we were floating in space
(and the falling snow like stars whizzing by
and the falling snow
the falling snow

the snow fell/falling like stars whizzing by
just like in the movies

By Draft 4 she had written:

as if we were falling in space
the falling snow like stars whizzing by
just like in the movies

Lines may begin in one section of the poem and end up in another.

“Because you are beautiful”...is the first line which I had thought out. [It] started out as a first line, then it became a title, and then, even though I kind of wanted to keep it there, I just took it and put it somewhere else and it worked out better.

The line “works better” because of its position at the end of the third stanza. It is emphatic. It concludes the imagery of spinning through winter’s starry night and the movies. And it gives the poem an important breath or pause. In a sense, this line serves as a kind of hinge for the poem. The poem pivots on the idea of beauty before it turns toward its more sober final stanzas.

These young women experienced intense relationships with their poems as they argued with themselves, discarded ideas, contradicted the poem all to figure out, as Sarah said, “What am I trying to say?” Revision, by its nature, may be seen as contradiction: the writer experiences tension between what is and what might be. Farah expressed this contradiction as a dynamic inter-

action between herself and her poem. She was cautious toward the poem and used terms such as “tamper with,” “unnatural,” or “manipulate” to describe certain revisions. At times she personified the poem or gave it an animated quality, calling it, for example, her “poor poem” or “an infant child” she had to “come to terms with” or “get acquainted with.”

Sarah’s composing showed a willingness to wait for meaning and form to emerge. She engaged in an inner debate about her work, writing first, then questioning herself afterward, and maintained language that intrigued her even if she wasn’t exactly sure what it meant. Her poem’s message did not become clear until the end of the third draft. Farah’s struggle with the well reflects the difficulty of working from a preconceived notion of what would work in her poem. Although she became intrigued by the possibilities of the well metaphor, Farah resolved her problem by returning, with some transformations, to her original draft, a strategy that mature poets often adopt.

Elements of surprise seemed to permeate the students’ composing. Farah’s images interested and amused her, and she conveyed a sense of still being engaged in interpreting the poem and finding new meanings. The poem’s paradoxical relationship-that-isn’t-there surprised her.

At first I thought it was pretty straightforward because I didn’t plan any paradoxes in it. But now I look back and see things that would be considered paradoxical...the sense of the weird, manipulative, possessing an object kind of thing. It’s not politically correct love.

This possessive, politically incorrect love was one of many surprises for Farah. She described several “weird” or “odd” discoveries in looking back at her work, and she maintained a self-critical stance toward her poem and herself. She was “shocked” by the manipulation of the handle, found the charm “disturbing, cheap and easy, like a cliché,” the snake “decadent” and “indulgent,” and the heart/bucket analogy “so glaring it disgusted me.” The question mark with which the poem ends also came as a surprise. “Don’t ask me where it came from,” she said. As she wrote the ending, she had a feeling “that something... ur-

gently had to be resolved...Something gigantic and momentous has to happen and there's got to be a resolution."

The pacing of Sarah's drafts—writing, stepping away, leaving something inconclusive, then returning—suggests how surprises occurred. Certain phrases seemed to surprise her. She wasn't quite sure what "Offend this nature with disregard" meant but was "enraptured" by it. "I love this line! I don't know how it came out, but I'm glad it's there." Regarding "the earthly fall of our youth," she described herself revising the final stanza and almost cocking her head, listening, and pausing, as if waiting for an answer.

I remember writing it and stopping at "we too must cease our frolicking," and I thought: we too must cease our frolicking—what?! "The earthly fall of our youth." It just came. So. I still can remember that just coming to me and I said, "Oh!"

Expressions such as "it happened again here" or "it just came" or "don't ask me where it came from" convey a sense of text as other, of losing oneself in an absorbed state where intent is held in abeyance. This experience parallels Murray's (1985) definition of surprise as "the experience of writing what (one) does not expect to write...is the essential writing experience and if you do not feel that first-hand, you cannot understand writing" (193). The poet plays over the surface of the text allowing connections to emerge and abandoning herself "to the materials, the actual materials of language, of sound and meaning. One discovers content" (Bunge 15). What surprised me most about these students' poems, beyond their obvious beauty and sophistication, was the complexity and interconnectedness of imagery and theme that developed, seemingly out of nowhere, in and through the process itself.

In working with high school poets I try to restrain my inner know-it-all, hold down the red pen, and listen. Listen to the story. Ask about the words. Why these words? Why this order? I also try to give students opportunities to surprise themselves and talk about those surprises, so that language becomes a means of discovery, of finding voice and meaning. I hold forth the notion that change is always possible, and a rush to

closure not necessarily desirable. Freed from predetermined meanings, real meanings can arise. The message is discovered, shaped, in the making—as in Greek, *poiema*, meaning "anything made," from *poiein*, "to make"—the poem.

Appendix

Draft #1

LOVE PoEM"

I wish you were a brown stone handle
with some light blue painted metal part.
I wish I could turn you around and around
and feel the dull flatness of you
against the palm of my hand.
I wish I had you laced between my fingers.
I wish I had you riding in my hair,
like little glimmering specks of dust.
I wish I had you slowly curving up
around my neck like a python.
I wish you were like tasty drop of thin
misty rain coming down in some childhood
forest.
I wish you were locked into my ribs,
sprawling out like fresh hay.
I wish you were sprouting in my
eardrums like a rich brown voice.
I wish we were hieroglyphic people frozen
on a bookcase together.
I'd always send you squared geometric
messages to you if—I'd imagine you
were kissing me if—I was a little
brown Egyptian hieroglyphic girl.
I wish I could wear you around my
neck like a charm.
I wish I could transform myself into
one big, black, towering question mark,
a sleek and fleshy exclamation of hope,
of uncertainty. Touch me.

Draft #7 (Final Draft)

LOVE PoEM

I wish you were a brown stone handle
with some light blue painted metal part.
I wish I could turn you around and around
and feel the heaviness of the ascending bucket
splashing up from the echoing wet.
I wish I had you laced between my fingers.
I wish that you were riding in my hair,
like lost confetti

or sprawled out in the grasses,
 like an intimate shadow.
 I wish I had you curving up my neck,
 like an anaconda,
 diamonds glittering.
 I wish you were like tasty drops of champagne
 coming down in some childhood forest.
 I wish you were locked into my ribs,
 that you were sprouting in my eardrums
 like a dark rich voice.
 I wish we were hieroglyphic people together
 frozen on a bookcase.
 I'd send you geometric messages
 if I were a little brown Egyptian hieroglyphic
 girl.
 I want to wear you like a bright yellow overcoat
 with big red buttons.
 I wish I could drink your sentences
 from a wineglass with maraschino cherries,
 with crumpets and pate,
 down to the last fermented word.
 I want to transform myself into one giant,
 towering question mark,
 a sleek and fleshy exclamation of hope
 and uncertainty.
 Touch me.

Draft #1 (Exploratory Draft)

snuggle nestle
 rest settle
 slumber

the snow loves you because you are beautiful
 it slumbers peacefully in your hair and eye-
 lashes
 (eyelashes) distinguishes itself from the plaid
 of your wool coat.

wool

and it is beautiful, vibrant against your dark
 hair and
 the plaid of your wool coat

you, too, are light and airy
 a spontaneous flurry of motion
 spinning, jumping, laughing.
 Winter does not deprive you of
 you love the snow to play in

and it loves your presence
 your summer glee

against window
 the dull light from a midnight sky
 behind lamp
 your blackened hair is a rest nest
 for snowy sleep
 you let it settle, cold and vibrant against
 the
 plaid of your wool coat, exposed
 against your bared skin
 unprotected

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