

# Poetry and the Puzzle of Meaning\*

(A story of professional growth)

by Ken Draayer

\* This article is printed with permission from  
*English Quarterly*, where it was first published  
(Vol. 30, #2&3, 1998)

Some years ago I invited a local poet to come to my grade 10 class to read her work. Kay and her poetry were both complex. She had a hip look, a street-wise manner, and some rough edges. The kids were more curious to read her than her poetry.

I don't think Kay had been in too many schools by that time either. She was unsure about how to engage kids trapped in rows of desks in front of her. Anyway, she read, and the kids were polite, but perplexed, and each time she finished a poem the class fell into an awkward silence. What do you do for a poem anyway? Clap? Murmur knowingly? Whistle? There isn't exactly a known etiquette for poetry readings.

Kay began to prod for some comment or conversation after each reading. She offered starters: "I wrote that one after a dream I had, once....," or, "Sounds crazy, huh...?" But the class was still stumped. "What do you think it means?" she finally asked after one particularly difficult piece, and suddenly I began wishing I could disappear. The problem was, I thought I was going to have to answer it. I could hear the kids thinking *We don't know. Ask Draayer. He's the teacher. He always knows what they mean.*

The classroom was more ominously quiet. "What do think it means?" Kay repeated.

My nightmares about being naked in front of a class originate in such waking moments as these. There I was, forced in front of my students to be an audience, as they were, for a

strange poem that had just gone - zing - way over my head or around one of its square corners, and I was being asked by no less an authority than the poet herself what the damn thing meant. Hoist on my own petard!, on the Big Question: *What does it mean?*

My nightmares about being naked in front of a class originate in such waking moments as these.

Mercifully, Mike, a student in a front row seat asked the candid question all of us (including me) needed to ask: "How do expect us to answer when we don't even know what you're saying?"

I have remembered that moment all the days of my teaching. It has focussed all of my subsequent efforts to find a pedagogy for poetry that would side-step for a while, or eliminate entirely the need for a direct assault on meaning. What I want to describe in this article are the gradual breakthroughs and the classroom

procedures that worked for me.

My beginning, of course, was to find a way to honour the complex, often ineffable first response to poems that Mike, his classmates and I so frequently have.

## OBSERVATION

*Meanings can be arrived at too quickly, the possibility of other meanings being too quickly foreclosed.*

Ann Berthoff, [The Making of Meaning](#)

The first thing I remember working on was the business of disengaging judgement and re-engaging simple observation and contact. Outside my teaching, I had become involved in Gestalt personal growth sessions in which participants were encouraged to use the senses to respond to others and to observe and report this contact starting with the phrase "I see you as..." I remember using this response-ability on the midnight drive home from Toronto, repeating *now I see* (this), and *now I see* (that), to avoid becoming mesmerized by the night lights.

I began to ask myself how I could conduct a classroom so that students would...simply *watch* a poem?

A short while later I was doing a version of this in the classroom, asking students occasionally to talk about a poem by reporting what they noticed in it, using the phrase "I notice that..." as a kind of prompt and control. It worked fine, though I couldn't at that moment, see where it would all lead.

Then I happened upon a book called *Beat Not the Poor*

*Desk* by Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Dean (Boynton/Cook). Among several interesting approaches to teaching writing, they described techniques for encouraging students to make observations about each other's writing, avoiding judgements which might preclude real insight by distracting from the details of the text. I also read with new understanding John Ciardi's essay *How Does a Poem Mean?* in which he suggests the question "What does the poem mean?" is less productive and critically important than asking "What is the poem doing?" He also talks about *experiencing* the poem, and I began to ask myself how I could conduct a classroom so that students would engage in more prolonged observation and reporting about poetry. Could I get them, somehow, to simply *watch* a poem?

## Experiencing Visual Art: Round One

I decided to take an oblique run at this through the use of visual art. My purpose was to encourage looking and seeing over judging, and reporting over interpretation. At the same time, I wanted students to experience judgement and interpretation as counter-points to seeing and reporting. Here's what we did.

I selected some slides from the collection in the Art department. While this selection was more or less random, I did try to represent a range of styles and periods, and I certainly tried to include works that were tough, particularly for me, because I needed to locate myself on equal footing with my students, as puzzled by a painting as Michael had been puzzled by Kay's poetry.

The classroom gambit was to play the question "What does it mean?" off against the easier question "What do you see?" With about a dozen slides to show, I would flip through them asking questions:

"Would you hang this in your home? Where? Bathroom? Living Room?  
Would you pay \$100,000 for this painting?  
Would you give the artist government money to further his / her work?  
Do you like this?  
Would you give it a prize?  
Could you do as well with a brush and some cans of paint?"

I asked anything to get them to make quick judgments about all the paintings and they were free with their opinions. I would especially ask now and then: "What do you think it means?" and let them wrestle with this most pre-mature and difficult question. Of course it gave them lots of difficulty. During this process, I was also searching for the painting they found toughest to look at, toughest to respond to.

---

## Experiencing Visual Art: Round Two

When we were done looking at all the slides for a first time, we'd begin a second look, with a different structure. First, I'd show only those slides that had been challenging, perplexing, and perhaps out and out rejected. With one of these on the screen, I structured a response from each person around the room by asking them to begin with "I am aware of..." I would model the simple reporting I was after, and keep the pace of observations going round the room from student to student, never stopping long for *discussion*. I'd go a second round of this observation cycle if I felt the class remained interested, or the painting had more to give. Gradually I would make more time for the critical appraisals and would even begin to invite it. Especially, I would ask for what they thought the process of observation had done for their ability to respond. The general reaction was that observation time increased the ability to respond by the collaborative accumulation of detail from the painting.

## A Poetry Salon

The transfer of all this to poetry involved being able to sustain both the sight and sound of it long enough for similar collaboration and discussion. It seems a simple thing to state that in order to think about poetry, students need some *stuff* about which to think. They need to notice things about poems (the more, the better), and trust that such attention will bear critical fruit. If this at first seems difficult it is because we all have masks to discard in the classroom before real understanding can occur. Students who profess to hate poetry, along with those who write it endlessly at home, and I with my nightmare-producing fears about losing classroom control - all of us have vested much in these identities which are hard to drop in favour of the poems in front of us. Thankfully, I was beginning to find an approach that allowed us all to be more genuine.

Students need to notice things about poems (the more, the better), and trust that such attention will bear critical fruit.

I began to hold a kind of conversation in class about poetry that I'll call a salon because it produced such literate and literary guests in my classroom, talking endlessly about poems among equals and sharing poems of their own choosing. In the first of these class periods, I gave students time (20-30 minutes seemed sufficient) to find three or four poems by flipping through the anthology and reading or skimming as they chose. I told them they could present us with any poem at all, as long as they agreed to two things:

! read it aloud

! tell us why they selected it, or it selected them

The anthology, I would remind them, contained enough variety in poetry that, given time, something there would draw them in. I might also read aloud (those two poems) and joke about not getting lost or swallowed up by any poems.

Once they completed this search, there were lots of indirect beginnings (Do books of poetry seem easy? Have you ever bought one? Would you? Did you find it easy to browse?) - as alternatives to starting right away with the sharing. When this eventually began, I'd ask everyone to turn to the page the reader was on and follow along, or I'd say don't look at it just now: listen, and try to tell us why this popped off the page for the reader. (I have since learned that the wisdom in this alternative is that, for some readers, the act of listening, as opposed to having to decode print, increases their comprehension.)

Several things make this simple sharing the beginning of a long and fruitful discussion. The length comes from the fact that ahead of us lie dozens of poems (every student has to have 3 or four to share). The poems are not of my selection. The poems are various (some, predictably, choose the 2-line Ogden Nash ditty and, unpredictably, find it absorbed quite well into the whole discussion). At all turns, we will prefer an observation to an interpretation, and all observations and all shared poems become equal. Most importantly, if there isn't a lot to be said about a poem, no one (especially me) will push. There are plenty of poems to get to, and moving quickly over the surface of poems for a while is part of an intent to turn responsibility over to the students. Along the way, we can talk about dozens and dozens of things:

Did you expect a poem on that subject?  
Does it remind you of anything?  
Who knows that word? Get a dictionary and find it for us, will you?  
How in heavens name should we read that one? It has no punctuation!  
Have you ever heard a poet read?  
I have a recording of that one. Want to hear it?  
What do you notice about this one?  
Would you read it again, for us?  
Are song lyrics poems?  
You picked a tough one, didn't you?  
I never understand completely, do you?  
Does it sound right if I read it this way...?  
Could it be sung?  
Could we say it well enough so that others could dance to it?

The salon conversation becomes a consideration of performance, of how we might experience the poem, of how the poem suggests its own performance. I was indebted to

---

Michael Hayhoe for proposing so many ways to sustain attention to poetry, and fortunate, at about this time, to attend OCTE and CTE conferences in which Michael was doing workshops describing several processes for collaborative readings of poetry, (e.g. coaching one person in the group to be the poem's final reader, or reading a poem chorally, everyone contributing some sort of sound to the poem at all times). I began to look for as many of these approaches as I could find to have them up my sleeve for later stages of the work. Actually, I set my students to this task by devising a new sort of oral presentation on poetry.

## Discovery Seminars

I hate to think of the number of years I wasted on poetry seminars in which a small group would present its critical view of a poem to a generally uninterested audience of peers. I would busy myself marking the seminar for its intelligent and supported insights while the rest of the class approached sleep. When I tried to keep the audience awake by assigning them the (marked) task of asking questions, I discovered they hadn't read the darn poem anyway. Seminars too often revealed what students had missed in the poem. Ever in search of how to play fair with this problem, I tried giving the first seminar group the option of re-presenting after I critiqued their work orally. This was, in my mind, parallel to providing editorial experiences in the writing class. If a written piece should get the benefit of revision, why shouldn't an oral presentation go through something parallel?

None of these notions brought fundamental change in my practice or in what students could do. Real change began when I once stopped a seminar group part of the way through because they were being uncharacteristically honest about their difficulties with the poem. We agreed that what they really needed was to be taken off the hot seat, to learn more about the poem, perhaps by somehow engaging their peers in an investigation of the poem. This was the beginning of my *Discovery Seminars*.

A discovery seminar has as its purpose not the display of critical understanding, but the gathering of responses on which to build such understanding. In my senior classes they became wedged between the salon about poetry in general, and a final critical paper on a particular poem. I expected the essay to be done on a poem of some length and difficulty, and I made a list from which students could choose. Then, they formed small groups of 3 or 4 to conduct the discovery seminar in preparation for writing their papers. The purpose of the seminar was to engage all their classmates in an experience of the poem from which they would gain sufficient insights to help them compose.

At the heart of the seminar is performance of the poem. This began with various readings and discussion in the salon, but by the time we arrive at the *Discovery Seminars* the students have had a practice round with a single poem done as a whole class. What

*performance* might have occurred in the salon was brief and impromptu. The performance now becomes slightly more formal and definitely required. Not a single performance, mind you. The idea is for the seminar group to keep the poem alive, to keep reader attention on it. To do this they might take a couple, or several performance approaches. Here's a short list of some of the options - from Michael Hayhoe's bag of tricks, and other sources:

- ! Read the poem as a group with all members of the group participating somehow at all times.
- ! Have all members of a group read the poem. Select one to be the group's oral reader. Coach that person to read the poem including some ideas from each member of the group.
- ! Give the poem a choral reading. Set some members of the group to producing simple sounds or rhythms while others read the words.
- ! Drum the poem.
- ! Break the poem up and re-assemble it in a way you think interesting. Read it aloud to the class this way.
- ! Use the entire class as your orchestra of voices and write a script that uses them all in a reading of the poem. Give them the instructions, and conduct them in a reading.
- ! Put the poem to music, or give it a visual setting in some slides of works of art.

It is important to establish that the group chooses at least two of these, and devises others of its own accord, and in keeping with what they think would be interesting or appropriate. If they were to do just a single performance, the temptation would be to judge it, especially when it, alone, would support an oral investigation of the poem. As in the *salon*, there is wisdom in having many opportunities for talk, in which context the occasional weak spot or outright failure disappears. Neither is the performance meant to be an "interpretation." This would be too heavy a burden and might well cause very self-conscious work. The purpose is simply to keep the poem interesting to its audience, and to sustain a discussion, a sharing of observations about it, as in the salon. (See Appendix for a list of assessment criteria for the seminar.). Participants in the seminar had two roles to play: they were responsible for provoking and sustaining attention to the poem, and they were responsible for collecting an inventory of responses on a flip chart as the seminar progressed. All participants were to play both roles. Essentially, the seminar was a continuation of the salon concept in which an extended conversation about poetry takes a natural turn towards wondering how they should be performed. Each group was to read its poem and consider the number of ways

they could ask their audience to perform it, read it, question it, and report on it. At minimum, perhaps, each group member would be in charge of one such activity and then, by turns, take the role of recorder of the inventory.

## Taking Inventory about a Poem

The inventory is an essential and simple piece in this process. It began back in the salon, or should I say I could have encouraged it to begin then by asking students to keep a log or journal of things they felt they discovered about poetry as we talked. At any rate, before the seminars begin, we have constructed one together as a class about a particular poem, as an introduction to the seminar expectations. The inventory is a random list of words and phrases the compiler makes to keep track of responses. It is probably lengthy, it makes different sense to different people, and some of its items will drop away when the person who uses it begins to think about what needs to be said. My professional reading at the time led me to Anne Berthoff's *Forming, Thinking and Writing*, a brilliant book that marries theories of perception to an understanding of composition. For Berthoff, lists are fundamental, and her book is an exploration of what writers/thinkers can do with lists to discover their meaning. In addition, I was also reading *Writing the Natural Way* (Rico), in which I learned a more associative and visual approach to listing called "clustering." In this latter method the writer doodles with circles and words in response to some focussing phrase or word until a moment of recognition occurs in which the thinker/writer arrives at a some conceptual response and begins to write. The point is that an inventory of responses collected from a collaboration gives all students something with which to compose. Here's an inventory we took in the class while reading and attending to Irving Layton's *Birth of Tragedy* which we chose because it seemed very difficult, yet intriguing. (Taking an inventory is something you can do well without understanding the poem!) It appears here on a divided page, but in reality was constructed on the board at the front of the room. The divided page is simply a good thing for students to use given that the inventory leads to the formation of larger critical concepts. More about that in a moment....

### Responses to *Birth of Tragedy*

explanation of a poem  
 a need  
 water / reflection  
 nature / spirituality  
 frailty  
 possession  
 nature and poet

### Critical ideas from the inventory

The poem expresses the power of natural cycles.

Opposites in the poem become united.

---

<p>arrogance - "I"          slain thing          insane          self-discovery          dominant voice          precious          poet - knowledgeable source          "like a mouth I serve"          cynicism          happy devastation          speaker - I          others? voices?          contrast          works to a serious ending          last stanza strange          removed like God          change of tone (mood)          a division that poet unifies          sense of loss          cycle          realistic, matter-of-fact voice          morbid          dreary          two separate worlds          shadows          progression in sadness          death</p>	<p>There is some sort of progress toward sadness and self-discovery.</p> <p>The poem is about the <i>job</i> of the poet - his role, his duty.</p> <p>The poem presents a change brought about by oppositions.</p> <p>The poem shows a futility in the death of so much beauty in nature.</p>
--	---

The "critical ideas" for the right column come from attending to the inventory in the following way. I ask the students (the inventory being scattered across the chalkboard at the front of the room) to suggest a group of items from the inventory that I should *circle* because, for some reason, they belong together. They suggest the items; I circle them (no questions asked). Then I ask what idea the circled items suggest, and we get several possibilities, and record them. I point out while we do this that the grouping is a consensus grouping and will not please everyone individually. Neither will the recorded critical idea be the one all will agree to. The point is (and students see it quite readily) that we are engaged in a fairly orderly process which begins with simple observation and ends with the sort of critical awareness everyone needs to begin talking or writing about a poem.

In one sense, the process of making an inventory needs to be experienced because there is a lot of possibility in it and one needs to experience how it can turn this way, or that.

But in another way, it is enough to simply take the list in that uncritical way advised for brainstorming, and then simply to question the list that has been constructed for all to see:

Show me some words that relate; I'll circle them.  
 What, in your mind, is the relationship between them?  
 Show me another set that I can underline?  
 What's the relationship?  
 Others I could mark with an asterisk...  
 What's the relationship...

And so we go on creating categories of response and framing critical ideas about the poem which at first seemed impenetrable, but now seems increasingly approachable. Clearly the critical ideas students arrive at from the inventory are perfect central themes for their papers. They have their own inventories collected from the *Discovery Seminar*, and now they have a way of probing them for essay material.

## Conclusion

Over a few years of research into the writing process, I repeatedly came across some version of the question, *How can I know what I mean 'till I see what I say?*, attributed to various writers. It appeared so frequently, I think, because it reflects the notion that writing is an act, a performance, an improvisation, an externalizing, a drawing down of words to the page which, in itself shapes meaning. It seems to me that reading is a similar venture. The end of it - understanding - needs to be conceived as the result of a reader's action on a text. Especially in the case of poems, many of which do not make meaning so apparent as we are accustomed to in other forms, we need to define an open and interactive approach.

*How can I know  
 what I mean 'till I see  
 what I say?*

This is, I suppose, where my story ends - with the discovery, or assertion that critical response to poetry is also an act, a performance, guided, perhaps, but still a series of actions: watching, talking, performing, listing, writing - that make critical insight an emergent thing. And there I am full circle thinking of Michael sitting in front of Kay, and Kay reading to Michael, and all of us not realizing we were free to say, one bit at a time, the marvellous chaos of thought and feeling poetry brings about in the confidence that once we see what we have to say, we will know what we mean.

## Bibliography

Berthoff, Anne, *Forming-Thinking-Writing* (Upper Montclair N.J., Boynton Cook Publishers

Inc., 1978)

Ponsot, Marie & Rosemary Deen, *Beat Not the Poor Desk* (Upper Montclair N.J., Boynton Cook Publishers Inc., 1982)

Rico, Gabrielle Luser, *Writing the Natural Way: using Right-Brain Techniques to Release Your Expressive Powers*, (J.P. Tarcher Inc., Los Angeles, 1983)

Dias, Patrick & Michael Hayhoe, *Developing Response to Poetry* (Open University Press, 1988)

## **Appendix: Criteria for Assessing the *Discovery Seminar***

This is a starter list. Not all would be used, or would suit the particular class.

### Group Efforts

- maintenance of an open investigation of the poem
- the poem is kept alive and under discussion
- clear understanding of the task
- the inventory is kept
- the inventory is lively and varied

### Individual Efforts

- takes responsibility for a performance strategy
- makes the strategy clear
- engages audience in the task and discussion
- is organized with materials to facilitate the performance
- asks good questions to keep the discussion alive
- seeks a range of response from a variety of classmates
- avoids disputation and argument
- keeps the inventory alive

4216 words