

from “Poets on Teaching”

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One of the marvels of poetry is how a good poem manages to be tactile and thoughtful, clear and mysterious, propulsive and unhurried—all at the same time. Teaching students to write such poems has never been easy since one wants to both inspire them and present them with some but not too much structure. To tell students to write a poem about spring and provide no further instructions is far too loose. To tell students to write a poem in Spenserian stanzas that deals with the consequences of the Versailles Peace Treaty is too tight. Students need a scaffold and some sense of direction; they don’t need a map that marks every turn in the imaginative road. Poetry is discovery not rehearsal.

Over the years when it comes to getting students to write poems I have used John Haines’ poem “The Long Rain” as a sort of tutelary spirit because as a poem it is both a good teacher and a good inciter. Since it is such a short poem, I can dictate it to students, which I feel is the best way to get them to receive a poem—by writing it down word by word and comma by comma. I dictate it line by line and take plenty of time so that no student feels harassed. Not only does dictation get students to carefully attend to the poem but it also engages their inherent curiosity—what is going to happen in the next line? Here is Haines’ poem (reprinted from *The Owl in the Mask of the Dreamer*):

“The Long Rain”

Rain falls
in the quiet woods.

Smoke hangs
above the evening fire,
fragrant with pitch.

Alone, deep
in a willow thicket
the olive thrush
is singing.

One the beauties of this poem is how utterly straightforward it is. Whatever unhappy notions students may have about poetry—it is has to rhyme, have a secret meaning, make every last ounce of sense or make no sense whatsoever—Haines’ poem tends to dispel. The first reaction to the poem is usually one of relieved delight as in “I can understand this.” Yet as a poem “The Long Rain” uses many of the strategies I am trying to teach my students.

Thus my discussion of the poem begins with the use of the senses. The visual sense tends to be taken for granted in a poem but Haines’ poem uses other senses to great effect. I ask students,

“What other senses are used here?” They are quick to note the smells—pitch, smoke, and rain, for instance. They also are quick to note the sounds—bird song, rain, and the quiet woods. I emphasize that a poem wants to go beyond the visual sense; the other senses don’t want to be left out. A good poem is not a tissue of abstractions. It lives in our senses by evoking the physical world.

I then talk about details with my students. When is Haines being specific? When is he using language that is explicit? Does he write “a bird is singing?” No, he writes “the olive thrush / is singing.” He is carefully noting a very specific bird. He is even writing “the” rather than “a” and that is something we take into account, how much emphasis is given to this particular bird. We go on to look at his adjective-noun combinations. He writes “willow thicket,” “quiet woods,” and “evening fire.” He is deliberately giving further information that pulls the reader further into the world of the poem.

At the same time we notice that Haines is fine with simple language. He could have come up with other verbs than “falls” and “singing” but he didn’t. I ask my students why they think that he preferred such unadorned language. This question (along with the others) keeps my students in the mode of evaluating each word choice and reflecting on how that word choice operates within the poem. In regard to Haines’ basic verbs, students often observe that he doesn’t want any word to call too much attention to itself. Indeed, he doesn’t seem to want to call too much attention to the poem as a poem.

But we observe that the poem is carefully fashioned. We note the short lines, each one of which delivers some crucial aspect of the scene. We note the three stanzas. We note the use of the present tense—this is happening right now, almost simultaneously. We note how much space there is in the poem, how those white spaces between the stanzas give the poem a sort of rhythm. We note that it doesn’t rhyme but there is plenty of attention to the sounds of the words, how, for instance “fire” and “fragrant” alliterate.

Then we write. My assignment can go anywhere because my dictates are simple: write three stanzas in short lines that don’t rhyme about your evening meal or some historical event or your most recent athletic endeavor or driving around in a car or on and on and on. Use your senses beyond the visual sense. Use details and avoid abstractions. Evaluate each word choice—no clichés, no lazy language. Use the present tense. Try to use at least one metaphor or simile. I emphasize that these are spurs to good writing not Draconian strictures. These “rules” guide how writers write.

What I have found again and again is that students take right off from the Haines poem into their own imaginative worlds. The poem is a handy structure that opens doors for them. It grounds them but allows them to fly with their own wings. It empowers them. It shows them that poetry doesn’t have to be fancy or arcane to be poetry. It shows them that they can do it, too.