

Literature Lit by Artifice

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著者がここで述べるのは、詩的な文章の作成を、批評的/創造的営みとして、文学作品の読解という行為を通して行うこと、それをいかに教えるかという点である。「詩的な文章の作成」は、講師(著者)からの助言もあって受講者によりその定義が異なるのだが、米国の作家および詩人による詩および散文を研究するための手段として用いられる。

The author describes how he teaches poetic writing as a form of critical and creative engagement in the act of reading literature. Poetic writing, whose definition is determined variously as the course progresses, is used as a means of exploring poetry and prose creatively.

- I. Asking What Poetry Can Be
- II. Poems Inspired by the Poetry of Jim Harrison and Ted Kooser
- III. Poems Written about Leon Walter Tillage's *Autobiography*
- IV. Assessing the Method



I. Asking What Poetry Can Be

I want to describe my life in hushed tones
like a TV nature program. *Dawn in the north.*
His nose stalks the air for newborn coffee.

I begin with a quotation, which is in fact a single poem, reprinted in its entirety.¹ Had I recited these words before an audience, with no previous introduction of myself, my intentions or topic, and in a way that would make the secondhand nature of the text imperceptible because lacking bibliographical reference and authorial ascription, who among those neither aware of my designs nor familiar with the three lines or their joint authors' writing style would imagine on hearing me speak that I was reciting poetry? Had I spoken the words in two distinct tones, as implied by the poem's use of italics — the first being a strident, audience-bound speaking voice; the second, a

¹ Harrison, Jim and Ted Kooser, *Braided Creek: A Conversation in Poetry* (Copper Canyon Press, 2003), 10.

nature-respecting near-whisper — would the listeners not imagine at once that I was announcing a sort of quixotic desire; perhaps launching into an homage to the conventionally soft-voiced narration of nature programs, spoofing my own habit-bound suburban existence or engaging in indiscriminate dramatic self-parody bordering on indecency? If, by contrast, I had announced from the outset that I was going to recite a poem, how would the listeners' perceptions of the language and its public performance change? Would my introducing the words as poetry not go much further than any linguistic features of the poem in convincing the audience that I was a reciter of poetry? Had a poetry reading been announced just before I spoke, would the likely thread of speculations about the curious intentions behind my words not be suspended? These questions suggest that calling a cluster of words 'poetry' can alone seem to make it so.

Asking what poetry is can lead one to conclude that any definition can be challenged or superseded by other definitions, if not by a single poem, insofar as every poem may be said to answer the question "what is poetry?" Every poem, or what is assumed to be a poem or labeled a poem, whether justly or in error, would appear to have "what is poetry?" as one of its topics, even when, or perhaps especially when, the topic or question as raised by it is entirely implicit. Much of the definition of poetry appears to emerge from an act of faith by which the reader accepts that the words presented as poetry are, indeed, poetic; and the poem published jointly by Ted Kooser and Jim Harrison that stands atop this essay is no exception.

And now,

I would like to describe how I teach literature in the crisp, neutral tones of a trusted journalist.

It's the first day of an American literature class on an April morning at a college in Southern Japan.

The Ohio-born instructor asks his students what they think poetry is.

Despite their resemblance to the untitled Kooser and Harrison poem, these words do not to my mind constitute a poem, which only returns us to the question of what a poem is. The creative writing instructor Mark Yakich, who has grappled with the question both as a writer and teacher, concludes, after examining and finding unsatisfactory a variety of responses, that "a poem operates as nothing in the world does."² That is why, for Yakich, the most generalizable feature of poetry is strangeness. He argues that more than from its odd appearance — "with its ragged

² Yakich, Mark, "What Is a Poem?: You Read It; It Reads You. An Object Lesson," *The Atlantic*, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/11/what-is-a-poem/281835/, 1-11 (2), November 25, 2013, accessed July 12, 2017.

right edge and arbitrary-looking line breaks”³ — poetry’s strangeness comes from its ambiguity; an ambiguity that challenges readers to “see the familiar anew” by rerouting “well-trod patterns of thought.”⁴ In the strangeness of the poem-object, Yakich finds pedagogical value. In my own approach, the pedagogical value of poetry is not deemed to sprout from a generalized quality such as strangeness. The question for me is whether students can identify any particular quality in a cluster of words and work them into their own writing. Yakich mentions one quality that he thinks should be cleared from consideration: “When we come across a poem — any poem — our first assumption should not be to prejudice it as a thing of beauty, but simply as a thing.”⁵ There’s in fact a score of conventional assumptions that one would do well to lay aside if the goal is to find utility in the reading and writing of poems.

In reply to the question about poetry’s essence, I receive from the thirty or so students who take my literature course every year at least a baker’s dozen of different distinct qualities of poetry. This suggests that among students who by their own admission do not read poetry there are nonetheless many ideas about what poetry is. Whether the responses appear to me to be quaint or mistaken, they provide a starting point for our discussion. However, for the students to read and eventually write poetry of their own, it helps if their preconceived ideas are relaxed or suspended. This helps to turn poetry, whatever it may be, into a realm of inquiry and reflection.

One way to bracket commonplace ideas about the nature of poetry is to identify, name, list, and exclude them. These starting points should be left behind. To do this, I compile a list of all the various descriptions or definitions of poetry that the students provide during the first class meeting. This *General Poetic Qualities List* is distributed to each student at the beginning of the second class meeting. Two such lists, each from a different academic year, show a number of shared assumptions.

For one class of students, poetry...

1. has rules.
2. has no rules.
3. uses metaphor.
4. has rhythm.
5. uses rhyme.
6. expresses feelings.
7. is not long.

For another class, poetry...

1. has rules.
2. has no rules.
3. uses metaphor.
4. uses rhythm.
5. uses rhyme.
6. expresses personal feelings.
7. is short in length.

³ Ibid., 3.

⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁵ Ibid., 10.

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| 8. has a theme. | 8. tells the author's opinion. |
| 9. uses polysemic words. | 9. uses specialized words. |
| 10. sounds beautiful. | 10. uses antiquated (old) words. |
| 11. uses symbolism. | 11. uses spacing. |
| 12. uses similes. | 12. makes seasonal references. |
| 13. is imaginative. | 13. does not tell a story. |
| 14. is creative. | |
| 15. is read aloud. | |
| 16. uses metered language. | |

If necessary, I paraphrase the students' input on the question to make its meaning plain for others. The qualities need not be conventionally recognizable, as are the use of symbolism, metaphor or rhyme. The use of italics in the epilogical Kooser and Harrison poem would be an example of what is called here a "quality." The italics signal a change in tone and the presence of two distinct voices. Thus, the definitions of poetry or descriptions of poetic qualities which are eventually repurposed in the students' own poems are to be found in the texts read in the course and not imported from previous experience. The preconceptions are laid out and examined, after which the qualities on the *General Poetic Qualities List* are barred as a means to explain the poetic nature of the poems we read. Since the students are asked to use poetic writing to explore poetry and prose creatively, the idea of poetry needs to be unleashed from such preconceived ideas, including those that appear perfectly justified or persuasive. Rather than criticize the ideas, we place them aside and endeavor to find qualities that stem from our experience of reading. This constraint allows one to verify whether students have read and responded to the poetry and not simply clung to conventional expectations relating to poetry in general. It puts the students in a frame of mind to seek out unique features in what is called poetic language. The students should have foremost in their minds the question, "What is poetry?," and be determined to find within each poem they read a new answer to the question. The question itself could be paraphrased, "What does this poem suggest poetry could be?"

Since many of my students have never read poetry, let alone English-language poetry, or thought about what it means to do so, I introduce a few ideas on how to proceed. Being somewhat new to them, the process of reading poetry rigorously, for its own sake, can be facilitated by a few rules of thumb, articulated as a description or in a list.

Read slowly. Fast reading is not good reading. Reading a poem can be like opening a watch to see all the little parts inside. Not the author, not the teacher, but the words themselves are a source of meaning. And not only the words as written but the sounds they make and their shape: the length of the individual lines. A poem is not only a

message, like a phone call or a broadly stated opinion. There is perhaps a strangeness to it that you can discover. It is an object to look at and to listen to. There is not only one meaning for each poem. Different perspectives on each poem are possible and desirable. Each time you read a poem, experience it differently by asking different questions about it.

It might be helpful to read poetry:

1. slowly.
2. repeatedly.
3. by imagining the scene or image that the poem portrays.
4. by thinking about the other poems written by the poet/poets.
5. by asking what the poet sees/hears/thinks about.
6. with an enjoyment of the rhythm of poetry (like when people sing songs).
7. with the proper stress on the poem's words.
8. aloud; by projecting your voice.
9. by learning the meaning of all individual words.
10. by thinking about the shape or visual aspect of the poem.
11. by thinking of the words that the poem could use but does not use.
12. by isolating things that may seem unusual or strange in the language.

Once the students have wrapped their heads around the idea that reading poetry will require a new set of assumptions, we discuss each poem separately and practice this multi-angled unearthing of poetic particularities. The students then list the poetic qualities they have remarked in Kooser and Harrison's poems. When the qualities have been discussed and clarified, the students set to work on applying them to original poems that they write on original topics. Since for many students this represents their first experience of writing poetry, I also model such creative imitation; that is, I show how to isolate a writing strategy, be it as simple as the use of alliteration or enjambment, and to import it into one's own work. The first time I prompt the students in this way, they are divided into seven groups named according to the days of the week, and each group is asked to find at least ten poetic qualities in the poems of Kooser and Harrison collected in their 2003 book *Braided Creek: A Conversation in Poetry*.⁶ When students read their own poems before everyone — after a process of writing and revision that spans weeks — they explain which of these so-called poetic qualities they have recycled in their own poems.

⁶ Harrison, Jim and Ted Kooser, *Braided Creek: A Conversation in Poetry* (Copper Canyon Press, 2003).

II. Poems Inspired by the Poetry of Ted Kooser and Jim Harrison

The students' untitled poems and their explanations of the features they identify in poems by Kooser and Harrison illustrate the rewards of their analyzing the language of the poems:

Sample poem 1

A marble in the drawer,
if you hold it to the sun,
sparkles more beautifully.

My poem is like a Ted Kooser poem because it

1. uses a conditional clause ("if you hold it to the sun"), (poems 15, 26, 35);
2. uses a simple verse structure and a single sentence (poems 37, 39, 40, 41);
3. relates to happiness (poems 37, 39, 40, 41).⁷ (M. Miyamae)

The student's poem is attentive to grammatical features of the American poets' work that, however mundane—a conditional clause, a single sentence—spur her to write her own poem; they give her words a certain form that she can feel confident constitutes a poem. In imitating such features, she also manages to capture the understated, nonchalant tone of many of the poems collected in *Braided Creek: A Conversation in Poetry*, even though she does not identify that quality in her list.

Sample poem 2

If summer comes, where will
spring go? I think it will
go into a closet.

My poem is like a Kooser/Harrison poem in that it

1. asks a question (poems 15, 19, 20, 28, 35);
2. uses personification ("spring go"), (poem 28);
3. uses enjambment (poem 29). (M. Fukushima)

This short poem exercises two conventionally understood poetic devices that were explained in class and also repeats the common Kooser and Harrison gesture of posing an impertinent, child-like yet wry question. Again, the explanation of the method falls short of the student's poetic achievement; she notes the presence of a question in her poem but does not point out that certain Kooser and Harrison poems are echoed as well in the *manner* in which the question is posed. The borrowings are more significant than recognized or acknowledged, and there's no problem in that.

Sample poem 3

I heard knocking on the window,

⁷ The numbers used to identify the Kooser and Harrison poems are provisional.

rain waiting outside
without an umbrella.

My poem is like a Kooser/Harrison poem because it

1. uses a comma to break up a sentence with regard to meaning (poem 18);
2. uses personification, relating “rain” to human behavior (poem 24);
3. expresses irony, suggesting rain needs an umbrella (poem 41). (Y. Miyata)

In this case, the mere use of a comma appears to spark the writer to compose an original poem. Three separate poems are mined for features or qualities, which are then distilled into 12 words. The result is a deceptively laconic display of rigor. Citing only the first of the poems the student references — identified here as Poem 18 — shows how slight the poetic graft is, as it is in the case of the other two poems she references.

I trace my noble ancestry back
to the first seed, the first cell
that emerged reluctantly from the void.⁸

One might object that the use of a comma within Kooser and Harrison’s poem is not by any stretch of the imagination poetic in nature; but even if one did not then counter that, in both the student’s poem and its model, the comma signals an equivalence or similitude (pushed in the student’s poem to the point of personification), the point here is not to restrict poetry to conventional definitions but to establish a task that the students can accomplish as a means of conveying their insights.

Sample poem 4

When my alarm clock rings,
I enter the ring of morning war.
Ring, Ring, Ring! Dong, Dong, Dong!

My poem is like a Kooser/Harrison poem because it

1. recreates the mood of mornings at my home (poems 8, 17, 37).
2. assimilates the alarm clock noise to a battle alarm (poem 24).
3. uses words that convey real-world sounds (poem 40). (H. Nakayobo)

This poem seizes on the analogy drawn in a Kooser and Harrison poem between, on the one hand, the way a child impatient to tell every detail of a story repeats in spurts of breath the word “and” (printed in their poem as “*And! And! And!*”); on the other, the sound of a tea kettle rattling with successive bursts of steam.⁹ The use of italics appears to underscore in both the Kooser and

⁸ Harrison, Jim and Ted Kooser, *Braided Creek*, 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

Harrison poem recalling TV nature programs and the student's imitative verse the onomatopoeic nature of the words. It also conveys the presence of a second "voice" or narrative perspective.

III. Poems Written about Leon Walter Tillage's Autobiography

The next stage involves the critical application of poetic writing. It's at this stage that the exercise of poetic writing bears fruit as a method of reading prose. The techniques of poetic writing are reworked to examine other kinds of texts, including fictional or biographical writing. One text my students have read and researched in this way is a short autobiographical work, *Leon's Story*, written on the basis of interviews with Leon Walter Tillage, a man who in his youth experienced firsthand life under Jim Crow and many decisive events of the Civil Rights Era.¹⁰ The book, which appears to render faithfully the author's vernacular English, portrays those eras with more accessible and in some cases more human insight than would detailed biographies of Martin Luther King Jr. or legal and political overviews of the period. Tillage's book lends itself to exploration by means of poetic writing. Since not only reading such a work but also writing about it poetically constitute a new experience for the students, I explain and model for them what a critical application of poetic writing would look like with respect to Leon Tillage's narrative. The poems written about the book *Leon's Story* can ask questions, make jokes, dispense with verbs, imitate sounds, end abruptly, and employ other elements of writing that the students may discover in the poetry of Kooser and Harrison.

Restated in an imperative mood, the course method amounts to this: Ask students what they think poetry is. List all the attributes they name and insist that none of them be called on to explain the poetic nature of the poems read by all class members. Make it their task to expand their initial ideas about poetry by finding in the poems read by the class other, previously unremarked qualities of poems. Then ask the students to write their own poems by employing the poetic qualities they have discovered in recognized writers' poems. Have the students read their poems aloud and articulate in front of others how they extracted and called upon those qualities to write about their own topics, images, or ideas. Once that is accomplished and the students have practiced writing poems according to certain self-discovered responses to the question of what can poetry be, have them write and explicate poems of a similar stamp that take as their inspiration a single passage or episode from a work of prose read by the class. That is, repeat the process of poetry composition; only, this time, substitute a work of prose as a source text for their poems. Make the students choose certain aspects of the prose narration to base their poems on and, when presenting their

¹⁰ Tillage, Leon Walter, *Leon's Story* (Sunburst Books, 2000).

poems, not only read them aloud, but also explain what poetic qualities they had in mind when writing them.¹¹

Consider samples of student poems inspired in their form by the writing of Kooser and Harrison and in their content by the biographical writing of Leon Walter Tillage:

Sample poem 5

A dog stood and waited near a window until his master came by.

He wagged his tail to get fed.

Except, in this world, the dog was a man

And he had no tail.

Only an earnest face.

But you are here and walk with us.

Only you do that.

It gives us all relief.

And in our white brothers

We do not lose hope. (E. Sayama)

In this poem, which like several poems by Kooser and Harrison employs anthropomorphic symbolism, the student writer likens the status of African-Americans to that of dogs, which likeness is only implied in Leon Tillage's story. Evoking a dog appropriates the incident poetically. Specifically, Stanza 1 recounts a state of affairs related by Tillage in the chapter "White Only" whereby blacks not only had to line up under a "COLORED" sign at a snack counter but also were granted the right neither to call attention to themselves nor to insist on receiving the items they had paid for. Proper service was left to the discretion of the white employee, who on occasion would confiscate black customers' money, provide no service and not deign to address them.¹² Conveying the status of blacks as recounted by Tillage by means of a human-animal analogy of the sort found in poems by Kooser and Harrison strikes an understandably scandalized note. Stanza 2 alludes to the increasingly public nature of the struggle for civil rights and to the efforts of peaceful protest organizers and in particular Martin Luther King Jr. as recalled in the chapter "Marching." The non-violent, hopeful attitude fostered by the leaders of the civil rights movement is related in a tone of convincing gratitude. Rather than return hate with hate, the young Leon Tillage and his schoolmates were encouraged to face the risk of violence and death to obtain their goals, and the poem written under the influence of both Tillage and the American

¹¹ The students were asked to write poems of at minimum fifty words.

¹² Tillage, *Leon's Story*, 49-50.

poets demonstrates the student's understanding of the non-racist, peaceful response to racism that emerged in the Civil Rights Era in the United States.

Sample poem 6

On the road
The smell of trucks
Full of people
The back of my father
I don't like the place
I like my father
But why did he slap me?
I don't understand

I don't want to kick a nigger
A nigger is also a person, isn't he?
I don't understand
I can't understand
Because I am a child (Y. Ando)

Sample poem 6 paraphrases an incident in which a white boy is scolded by his father for having spoken respectfully to the young African-American Leon Tillage and then ordered to kick Tillage gratuitously. As Tillage recalls the incident,

Once I was working at the tobacco market. I worked there after school and at night helping to unload the trucks and work around the warehouse in general.

I was standing in the aisle and two guys and a little boy came up behind me. I didn't see them. The little boy touched me on my leg and said, "Pardon me, I want to get past." I stepped over to one side. The father stopped the little boy right there in his tracks and said, "What did you say to him?" And the little boy just looked at him. He didn't know what was going on, and the father said, "I said, what did you say to him?" And the little boy said, "I said pardon me?" And his father slapped him in the face and told him, "You never do that. You never in your life tell a nigger pardon. You kick him if he is in your way." He told the little boy to kick me. And the little boy kicked me right on the shinbone. In fact he kicked me twice. He started walking off and looked back at me with his blue eyes and he had a sad look on his face as though he was sorry. I'll never forget the look on that kid's face as long as I live.¹³

¹³ Ibid., 76-77.

The poem is written from the point of view of an incidental character, a young white boy whose father insisted he act abusively toward Leon Tillage. After evoking the insalubrious surroundings in which Tillage worked, it articulates with first-person poignancy the moral confusion of a young person who is asked by an adult — his father, no less — to perform an act of violent racial discrimination against another child. The use in the poem of the racial epithet common to the period shows the degree to which the white boy is unaware of the ambient racism of his elders, even as he is shocked at being ordered to use racist violence. The repetition of “I don’t understand,” which evokes the repetition found within certain poems of Kooser and Harrison, is amped up by the modal inflection of “I can’t understand” in a way that reflects the poets’ frequently ending their brief poems with a kind of emphatic crescendo. This effect craftily draws attention to the fact that to become a white adult in Jim Crow country, one has to understand that which cannot be easily understood because it violates both a feeling that stems from naturally formed human conscience and the commonly preached dictate known as the Golden Rule — do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It exposes racist attitudes as being learned behavior that was imposed by the old generation on the nation’s youth.

Sample poem 7

“Do you understand yourself?”

The question may sound easy, but it is difficult.

Look in the mirror.

I just say, “I am myself.”

But what is between my self and the mirror? (R. Yamauchi)

Using imagined dialogue as Kooser and Harrison often do, the student writer focuses on the opening anecdote of Leon Tillage’s narrative wherein the author acknowledges that as a child he had internalized the racism of his Jim Crow community of Fuquay, North Carolina to the point where he, too, hated the color of his skin: “I remember that as a young boy I used to look in the mirror and I would curse my color, my blackness. But in those days they didn’t call you ‘black.’ They didn’t say ‘minority.’ They called us ‘colored’ or ‘nigger.’”¹⁴ Between the boy and the mirror slide common racial epithets. The epithets become like a degrading film or web through which he strains to evaluate himself objectively. The poem responds to Tillage’s recollection by surmising that, rather than be exceptional, the mediation by society of one’s own self-assessment must be universal. This leads to the Kooser-and-Harrison-like query of the final line: “But what is between my self and the mirror?” Writing a poem about Leon’s anecdote makes the act of looking in the mirror appear less simple than it once did. In the language of the educator Mark Yakich, the student has had a common

¹⁴ Ibid., 3.

pattern of thought rerouted. She has been challenged to reflect on the nature of her self-assessment and particularly on the separation of the reflected image and the conscious mind that perceives it. For the first time, her attention is drawn to the seemingly vacuous space between one's regard and one's reflection and finds that it is in fact rather crowded. A private moment now appears public through and through. Reflection on such matters of identity is one thing that a poem can be.

Sample poem 8

Being afraid of being excluded,
 Being afraid of being lonely,
 Keep throwing rocks,
 Forgetting the warmth of my mind,
 Attacking blacks,
 Expanding blackness.

A white horse,
 A white man,
 Have meaningful existence,
 Are influential beings.
 Well, what about the black man?
 What about a black horse? (A. Futamata)

Stanza 1 elides the subject, which is nonetheless recognizable as one of the unnamed white boys who were socialized to harass African-Americans. The writer demonstrates a psychological understanding of their behavior that is not spelled out in Leon Tillage's narrative. On this understanding, the young white boys who mock and abuse blacks act contrary to their natural goodness because they fear being ostracized by the larger white community. Acts of violence thereby become acts of group adherence. This process leads to the poem's craftily articulated paradox: "Attacking blacks, / Expanding blackness." By attempting to do what they feel is necessary if not morally approved, the boys end up acting in a way that's morally reprehensible. Stanza 2 offers textual criticism of Tillage's narrative. It alludes to a character named Mr. Clark, of whom Tillage writes, "He had a big white horse, and sometimes he would come down to the school when we'd get out and he would walk with us, him and his horse. When he would see the bus coming, he would tell us, 'Don't run, don't run, they're not going to bother you.' He was a good man, he was a religious man. And he was right — they wouldn't bother us if he was there."¹⁵ The poem seems to question a descriptive detail — the whiteness of Mr. Clark's horse — and ask whether it does not let slip into Tillage's otherwise perceptive narrative a fraudulent

¹⁵ Tillage, *Leon's Story*, 37.

black-white dichotomy in moral matters whereby black is associated with evil and white with goodness. It's a debatable point — a white horse is sometimes just a white horse, with no symbolic import — but the poem's questions illustrate how poetic writing can tackle textual criticism without obliging the writer to produce long-form analyses.

IV. Assessing the Method

Should I fail to see realized the dream of creating a battalion of student poets eager to examine and write poetically about all aspects of their lives and education, I could still console myself with the awareness that, in writing their own poems, the students experience poetry in a more fruitful way than they would if I were simply to lecture to them about specific poems or test them on literary texts and their historical contexts. One enlivens the reading and writing of literature by having students participate in them creatively. I don't address the students as if I enjoyed a privileged, *native* position with respect to either the English language or to American literature. The students are not addressed as if they were outsiders with respect to a specialized form of knowledge or *non-natives* with respect to English: rather, they are invited to observe in detail American literature and the English language and asked to create bits of the latter themselves through innovative imitation.

The *critical thinking* aspect of the initial exercise of writing a poem about any conceivable topic that employs elements identified among the poems of Kooser and Harrison is enhanced by asking students to explain the function of such poetic qualities. For instance, why do they think a certain poem uses assonance or alliteration? How do such features relate to a poem's apparent content, to its imagery or to its sound patterns as a whole? Such questions can be particularly meaningful when the students respond to them with respect to their own writing. In writing and discussing their own poems, students become motivated to know such things as what alliteration or enjambment is because they are eager to identify and put to use techniques of writing that can help them complete their assignments. The emphasis on specific techniques of conspicuousness or strangeness within poetry leads some students to a first-time experience of writing poetry and, moreover, one that is not harnessed to the idea that poetry must be sentimental or didactic; that it must tell others how to act or embrace blandly conventional sentiments. (To further encourage this, I introduced a stipulation relating to the work by Leon Tillage, which is that no poem based on it is allowed to have as its explicit theme that racism is bad, because, whatever it may be, poetry, like any other form of creative writing, is not served well when put in the exclusive service of truisms.)

As for having students write poems about specific passages within a course-read book, sample poems 5 through 8 illustrate the students' ability to do so with the type of critical insights that,

were they articulated in prose, would not likely pack the same punch. By constructing poems, the students can analyze literary passages without having to produce long-winded analyses. Literature is no longer presented as the private enterprise of a solitary lecturer or the hermetically appropriated domain of a so-called native instructor. Moreover, one can challenge students in Japan to participate in literature in a way that they are most comfortable with, namely, as readers and writers acting within a group. Having them share their poems within defined groups can alleviate their culturally-rehearsed anxiety about making individual contributions in front of others.

To find echoes of voices — voices of poets and prose writers — converging in the students' poems is more meaningful than observing certain students score high on fact-recognition tests. It proves the value of literature as a critical and creative practice in which students become equal participants — creators who do not always have considerable talents, but who, for a time, are asked to give close attention to language and to use poetic writing as a means of exploring meaning within other texts. Moreover, it responds to my conviction that education in the liberal arts must be creative in nature, since creative acts are in many ways the muscle of language learning.

The idea of “poetic qualities” is nothing other than a way of organizing student perceptions, of assuring that students respond to literary texts creatively but in a way that does not lack rigor. It's an artifice designed to give students a way of interacting with literary texts and understanding them better. It throws light on their work space and draws pencil nibs to paper. Having no predetermined character itself, the notion of “poetic qualities” helps students to organize personal observations of language. Perhaps the qualification “poetic” mystifies; it may just as well inspire in the students a feeling of discovery in so far as it helps them to pin down and recycle certain elements of literary language. It can give shape and purpose to what might otherwise seem an arresting or intimidating request: “Tell me what you think of what you read.” It can nudge readers toward identifying not merely contents in a meager sense — testable bibliographic facts or vocabulary — but also techniques of writing on the one hand and on the other themes and issues.

My intention is not to present a theory of poetry for its own sake but rather to explore a method of teaching literature to Japanese college students that is neither dogmatic nor alien to the traditions of liberal arts which were important in my own experience as a student of literature. It has been a decades-old lament among Western educators that Japan has no solid liberal arts tradition, and my first-hand observations of literature department meetings where literature is consistently the furthest thing from consideration appear to illustrate this unfortunate state of affairs. The situation may in fact be getting worse if it is true that, as Japan-based literature proponent and language educator Paul Hullah has lamented, “Literary texts are vanishing from

textbooks and curricula...”¹⁶ It appears that in Japanese higher education, literature is at times presented as yet another subject to be reduced to a set of testable facts and figures that teachers isolate and control with lectures and multiple-choice tests. Rather than be asked to produce literary forms in their own, modest ways, students are subjected to professorial monologues about great works and in some cases asked to memorize facts concerning famous authors’ lives or historical episodes in the so-called history of literature. Works of literature are at times reduced to trivia — who wrote what? in what year? in what genre? — as if the works’ imaginative and creative weight were merely incidental. Literary works are not treated as matter for exercising one’s imagination or powers of observation. They are “studied” in translation or without being read at all. Admittedly, there is a particular challenge in teaching literature in English in Japan, which is that many works are difficult to read and would require more time to read and explore than is allotted for a given group of students. What I have tried to convey in this short piece is my own way of meeting it.

(Essay received July 18, 2017)

¹⁶ Bibby, Simon, “Simon Bibby Interviews Literature Specialist Paul Hullah,” *The Language Teacher*, Issue 36.5 September / October 2012, Readers’ Forum, 31-34, (31).