To the Teacher

There may be no greater challenge, or joy, for the elementary classroom teacher than teaching young children to understand and love poetry. Few areas of high intellect are so inspiring, or have been the victims of such disrespectful stereotypes. Poetry is seen in preposterous terms, as unmanly, overemotional, and spontaneous. People think that poems are supposed to be pretty.

The truth is that poetry is a great intellectual discipline that also creates works of art, and that these works of art represent some of humanity's best efforts to understand the truths of the world.

The Music of the Hemispheres focuses on the traditional elements and techniques of poetry: formal stanzas, rhyme schemes, traditional feet, alliteration—even though they are not always the most salient elements of modern poetry. This may seem stubbornly traditional unless you look as deeply into modern poems as we are looking into traditional poems, for it is not that modern poets do not know or employ these devices; it is that they subtly employ these devices, and hide them under a thin covering of seeming irregularity. But silently, with genius, the traditional techniques are assembled, just under the surface. A perfect example comes from Sylvia Plath, whose poem "The Moon and the Yew Tree" describes the troubled interior landscape of her spirit. Plath wrote:

> This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary
> The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue. . . .
> Fumy, spiritous mists inhabit this place.

Ah, we think. No end rhyme. No regular meter. No alliteration. She appears to have just written the lines spontaneously, from her feelings. Well, no, look again. The first line is primarily dactylic, the second line is primarily iambic, and the incredible third line is almost perfect, evil trochees; but for

one unstressed syllable added to foot two, and an unstressed syllable turned into a stressed syllable in foot five, this would be perfect trochaic pentameter:

1 2 3 4 5
Fu my / spir it ous / mists in / hab it / this place.

Plath understood the power of meter, and the way trochees cancel the reassuring normality of iambs. Having done that, she then filled the line with a hissing sound track to make the fumes and mists more real; we hear *f*'s, *s*'s, *h*'s, and *th*'s, and the line reeks of the *ih* sound of six *i*'s in six words:

Fu my / spir it ous / mists in / hab it / this place.

What we are seeing is not a poet who has abandoned the powerful techniques of traditional poetry, but one who has learned to submerge those techniques, just below a veil of protective spontaneity. Plath uses regular trochaic pentameter, but switches two syllables to make it unnoticeable. She repeats vowel and consonant sounds, but hidden within the words, rather than as alliteration at the beginnings of words, where it would be obvious. She avoids showy end rhyme, but deftly puts *mists* and *this* in the same line, as near internal rhymes. It wasn't that she didn't want to write real poetry, she just didn't want us to catch her.

In order to understand all true poetry, both traditional and modern, students need to have a solid grounding in the technical details of traditional poetry. Only in this way will students develop the art detectors that will enable them to enjoy both Robert Burns and Sylvia Plath.

Real poetry is far more powerful and accomplished than its stereotypes imply.

In *The Music of the Hemispheres* I have tried to put the microscope on the small surfaces of words, to let children really see the little things that become so large in poets' minds. To understand poetry, we must not look at whole stanzas or lines at a time; we must look at single consonants, or even a half of a consonant. Only with this maximum inspection will we see that a line like "Fumy, spiritous mists inhabit this place" is filled with consonants made by exhaling breath: *sss*, *fff*, *hhh*, *thththth*. When it comes to poetry, Mies van der Rohe was right: God is in the details, and the smaller the detail, the greater the scene. Poetry lives in this paradox. This is the reason for the letter and word-based graphics in this book; it is intellectually important that the children see a word that fills a page, or even one letter that fills a page. Let them stop, and look, and think. Let them trace the curves of a *g* with their hearts. Let them distinguish *fff* from *sss*. Here (hear) is where they can begin to love language.

As for the stereotype that poems are pretty, or should be, we must know that poems are not, and should not be, so pitiful. Like symphonies or great paintings, poems embrace the wild spectrum of human life, and of the whirling world that human beings observe. Some poems are pretty, some are sad, some are inspiring, some are funny. Poems tell the truths of the poets, and sometimes what poets feel is shock, or rejection, or love. The crux is for students to see the beauty in the art of a sad poem, such as Rupert Brooke's gorgeous poem about his fear that he might die in France (he did). Yes, in a way, this poem is sad; it isn't pretty like Wordsworth's poem about the daffodils, and yet Brooke's poem is very, very beautiful. One can love this poem. The thoughts in it are beautiful and valuable, and the poem as a piece of sound-art is beautiful, with its soft consonants: "If I should die, think only this of me..." To teach students the beauty of poetry, we can use the techniques of real poets to disclose the beautiful details and ideas, and not be stopped by a poem, just because it has a sadness.

Poetry, like physics, is one of those rarified zones of intellectual possibility where our minds and spirits can do something extraordinary.

Singing Poems

The development of a poetic mind involves an awakening to the personalities of vowels and consonants. Once the vowels and consonants stand out, once we are really awake to them, we begin to notice poetic brilliance that would otherwise be invisible. Making technique audible is what makes it visible. A beautiful way to awaken students' minds to the sounds of words is to split the vowels and consonants, and to let the students sing the words, with the teacher acting as conductor and pointing to the groups in turn, with symphonic flair. For example, divide the left side of the class from the right side of the class. The left will sing the consonants, and the right sing the vowels. With the line in question written on the board in a vowel/consonant split, let the students sing:

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R m   R m   wh r f r   rt th   R m  ?
 o eo  o eo   e e o e a     ou  o eo?
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First, let the consonants sing by themselves. They will sing rrrrr, mmmm, rrrrr, mmmm, whwh, rrrr, ffff, rrrr, rt, th, rrrr, mmmm. Then the vowels by themselves: oooo, eeee, oooo, oooo, eeee, oooo, eh, (silent), oooo, (silent), ah, owww, oooo, eeee, oooo. The realization should be dramatic: the consonants are so nice: rrr, mmm, and the vowels are so consistent: oo, ee. It is a beautiful line. We begin to realize why the dialogues in *Romeo and Juliet* are regarded as among the greatest poetry in English. Now, having let each side sing alone, let them sing through the sounds in correct order:

C: RRRR
V: OOOO
C: MMMM

A different variation of this method is to sing all the vowels at once, and then all the consonants at once, and then combine. For example, if we are examining Sylvia Plath's line, "Fumy, spiritous mists inhabit this place," here is what would happen:

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F m , sp r t  s m sts  nh b t th s pl c .
 u y,   i i ou  i    i a i    i    a e.
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Divide the consonant side of the room into smaller groups and tell them, "You three sing ffff," you four sing ssss," "You three sing th...." and then tell the vowel side of the room to all sing the lower ih sound of the i: "You sing ihhhhh." In a case like this, it is not necessary to include every single vowel or consonant, because you are calling dramatic attention to certain sounds. Then you raise both hands like a conductor, and point to the left side of the room, and together they sing:

ffff hhhhhh ssssss th.... all at the same time,

and a great hissing sound emerges in the room. You wave them off, and then turn to the right (vowel) side of the room, and they sing:

IH.......

And then you have both sides sing at once. With this, the true hidden music of Sylvia Plath's line rises in the air, a FUMY, SPIRITOUS, MISTY sound: ssfihsshhhihihsssihhhhihihththth. And students can hear the music of the hemispheres.

The Poem of the Day

One of my favorite classroom techniques for teaching students to love poetry is to begin class with the *poem of the day*. Part of what this means is simply to choose a poem each day, and read it aloud to the students. But it is the details of this practice that count. It is important to develop a collection (this takes time) of poems one loves—I used to type them out and save them in a notebook—and each day to select the one that the moment seems to call for. If it has been a hectic time, then the serenity of Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" might be perfect. Each day, read a poem to the students to start the day with literary feeling.

Now, here's the trick: after a month or so, you can then ask the students which poem they would like to hear again. I used to explain that poems are like (this is a simile) music that you play over and over; you play the music you want to hear *now*. As students begin to say, "I want to hear the Blake poem about the tiger again!" you begin to teach not just their intellects but their affects. They start *preferring* certain poems, and having *favorites*. Once they are doing that, and looking forward to hearing certain poems again in poem-of-the-day time, they have begun to love poetry.

The way one reads the poem of the day is important. I always tried not to read the lines in too poemy a way, but to read in a normal voice, slowly, like it was just something real. Usually, giving dramatic exaggeration to one's voice spoils things; it seems to be better just to read the words well, and let the words do their jobs.

Notice that even though there are numerous sources, such as on the internet, for daily poems, this is really a bad idea that defeats much of the purpose. By following your own path to the poem of the day, you first inspire yourself as you search for poems and become more acquainted with poetry, and then you inspire the students with the way poems are spontaneous responses to the moment.

Poem Recipes

A technique that helps students understand poetry is to give them a recipe for a poem, to be turned in a week or more later. For example, students who have worked their way through this book could be asked to turn in a poem that contains the elements of this recipe:

a ballad stanza (or two):
- iambic tetrameter lines 1 and 3
- iambic trimeter lines 2 and 4
- end rhyme scheme abcb

alliteration
internal rhyme
a metaphor

Give the students a week or more, and then after the ballads come in, read through them together and post them on the wall. Talk about what they learned by actually trying to write one of these poems. After a recipe or two, let the students help decide what will be in the next recipe. Maybe the next recipe will be:

two quatrains of trochaic tetrameter
no end rhyme but eye-rhyme and at least three internal rhymes
a simile
onomatopoeia

One of the best twists to put on the poem recipe is to give students a recipe that happens to be the actual recipe for a famous poem. Then, when they turn in their poems, you can show them the famous poem, that in form is just like theirs! This will let them feel a connection to the poet and an understanding of the poem that is not attainable in any other way. For example, we might give the students this recipe:

two sestets (six-line stanzas), about two characters
abcbdb
lines 1, 3, 5 iambic tetrameter
lines 2, 4, 6 iambic trimeter
the first sestet is about one character, and the second is about the other
paradox (a contradiction such as "I only know that I know nothing") is involved

A poem that meets this recipe, from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*:

The sun was shining on the sea,
Shining with all his might:
He did his very best to make
The billows smooth and bright—
And this was odd because it was
The middle of the night.

The moon was shining sulkily,
Because she thought the sun
Had got no business to be there
After the day was done—
"It's very rude of him," she said,
"To come and spoil the fun!"

Even though the elements of poetry are easy to explain, and seemingly easy to understand, you

may find that childen struggle to hear certain things. They become frustrated trying to make a line iambic, or they may struggle for rhymes. It is not uncommon for children (or adults) to confuse stressed and unstressed syllables, or to be unable to hear the stresses. All of these things take time to be absorbed, and so when children do their best to write poems that meet the recipes, we must be patient and supportive. This is not a time when students should see their grades threatened because they have difficulty grasping or hearing. The recipe should be fun, a project where everybody gets celebrated, and where we particularly enthuse over those details that perfectly match the recipe.

One of the keys is to give elaborate explanations when you give the recipe assignment. If you write the recipe on the board, one item at a time, be sure to explain each one in detail, give examples, and check for understanding. Offer to consult with work in progress.

If we assign the first of the sample recipes above, a ballad stanza with alliteration, internal rhyme, and a metaphor, we might get Emily Dickinson-esque poems like these:

My slow old dog sleeps every day,
Beside my dad's dark chair.
The dog-bed is his safe bird nest—
A bird with fuzzy hair!

The breakfast that I like to eat
is little fruity spheres—
A pastel-painted gravel that
I'll eat—no fears—for years.

Poems like these would be fine. They can be funny, or witty, or serious. As long as the students continue to improve, and to get a feeling for what the work of the art of poetry is like—that is the goal. With the recipes, we want children to have an insider's experience. Once they have written several recipe poems, they will no longer ask if a poet really knew he or she was alliterating a certain two or three words, because they will know first-hand that these things do not happen by accident.

Things to Talk About

Rhyme

1. Think about rhymes and songs. How are they similar, and how are they different?
2. Why do rhymes please us?

Alliteration

1. Do you think it is easy or difficult to work alliteration into a poem? Why?
2. In some poems, poets use no alliteration, and in other poems they use a lot. Why?
3. Why is alliteration more obvious than repeated sounds that are in the middle of words?

Meter

1. What meter would you use to capture the rhythm of a galloping horse? Why? Look up Sir Walter Scott's poem "Lochinvar" for one solution.
2. Why do you think poems with regular meter sound good to us?

Stanza

1. Do you like the way the even lines are shorter in a ballad stanza? Why or why not?
2. Why is the last stanza of a sonnet only a couplet? Is that a good idea?

Figures of Speech: Metaphor, Personification, and Simile

1. Which do you think is a more interesting figure of speech, simile or metaphor? Why?
2. Why might one metaphor be more interesting and creative than another?
3. Why do similes and metaphors help us understand things better?
4. Why do we like to use personification in poetry?

Things to Do

Rhyme

1. Write five to ten words on the board, divide the class into small groups, and have them brainstorm how many rhymes they can find for each word.
2. One-syllable rhyme like *rope* and *hope* is called masculine; two-syllable rhyme like *furry* and *hurry* is called feminine. Have the students write a poem that uses lots of feminine rhymes.

Alliteration

1. Write nouns of noisy things on the board: *ocean*, *wind*, *thunder*, *siren*, etc. Then let the students work in small groups, each group selecting one of the nouns, and have them decide what letters would work best for alliteration that would capture the sound of the noun.
2. As a whole-class activity, work together to write a poem about a waterfall, with all students contributing words that have the *sh*'s, *r*'s *pl*'s and other sounds that sound waterfally.

Meter

1. Pick a page from a book that all of the students have, and ask them to pick words from that page, rearranged, to create a line of regular meter. The line doesn't have to make sense.
2. Have students write a quatrain, each line in a different meter/foot!

Stanza

1. Have the students invent a new stanza, name it, and then write a poem using it.
2. Discuss: Is there such a thing as bad poetry? What might be the qualities of the best poems?

Figures of Speech: Metaphor, Personification, and Simile

1. Pick a feeling, such as happiness, and brainstorm as many metaphors as possible for it.
2. Have students write a poem that is all metaphor, and the reader has to guess what it is a metaphor for; the poem is a metaphor puzzle!
3. Ask students to explain why personification is a form of metaphor, rather than a form of simile.

Poetry Pretest

1. The words “long laborious lunch” are an example of:
   a. iambic pentameter
   b. onomatopoeia
   c. alliteration
   d. internal rhyme

2. The book entitled *The Poetics* was written by:
   a. Aristotle
   b. William Butler Yeats
   c. Emily Dickinson
   d. Robert Burns

3. The line “Hopeless dusty grime and clutter” is an example of:
   a. iambic pentameter
   b. dactylic tetrameter
   c. iambic tetrameter
   d. trochaic tetrameter

4. The line “The ping of the stone hitting the metal” contains:
   a. onomatopoeia
   b. alliteration
   c. end rhyme
   d. anapest

5. The line “Down to the valley we rode without faltering” is an example of:
   a. dactylic tetrameter
   c. trochaic tetrameter
   c. iambic tetrameter
   d. anapestic tetrameter

 This quiz may be copied and distributed to students.

6. The ballad stanza has:
a. two lines
b. three lines
c. four lines
d. five lines

7. A sonnet has:
a. three quatrains and a couplet
c. a sestet
c. four couplets
d. two sestets and a quatrain

8. The line "Life is a walking shadow" contains:
a. internal rhyme
b. a metaphor
c. a simile
d. a sonnet

9. The rhyme scheme for a ballad is:
a. abcb
c. ababab
c. abab gg
d. abcd

10. The line "The eagle dropped like a meteor from space" contains:
a. alliteration
b. a metaphor
c. onomatopoeia
d. a simile

 This quiz may be copied and distributed to students.