

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Teaching Poem-Writing

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Philippine Studies vol. 10, no. 4 (1962): 669—672

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Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

Notes & Comment

Teaching Poem-Writing

Students hate nothing more than being assigned to write a poem, yet gain more from it than probably any other literary exercise (with the possible exception of the short story). Since the ordinary assignment will be one or two stanzas, they are confined to the employment of at most 40 to 50 words, hence cannot escape into the safe underbrush of verbosity but must stick to meticulousness and precision. Each word must be weighed for its meaning value and also its imaginative content and also for its sound fitness within its own phrase and line and stanza. The meshing in of intonation and stress must be exact or rhythm is nowhere. Thought organization must be tight or the intended eight lines becomes 24 or more—because the inchoate poet gets trapped at the close of each stanza by the exigencies of rhyme, solves his dilemma by stretching out into another stanza, and so on, until he feels he is in an endless maze; and usually is. (One student, I remember, kept handy always the rhymes *breath* and *death*, figuring he could close out anything with these.) The simultaneous marshalling of responses to all these disparate demands on language is what engenders hate, but it is also what imparts mental discipline.

The first step is, I think, having each one make sure in advance of what he essentially is going to say: not the full development (which will be determined by the drift of the verse) but the basic skeletal frame. An early training in this could be the writing of some *haiku*, the Japanese 17-syllable form which (not to be intricate about it) often consists in the selection and concise expression of a single image. Schooled thus, the student is somewhat more ready to put down on paper the core of each of his two stanzas.

a bird in flight—Stanza I
seeks ease in freedom—Stanza II

Or—

the lake-reflected sun—Stanza I
illumes the leaves—Stanza II

Or—

the free clouds of the sky—Stanza I
are trapped in the water—Stanza II

The idea in each case is to keep the basic thought simple so that adornments can be hung on it without its having to be developed further and thus trapping one into physical extension. After some work in these simpler observations and their poetic enhancement the student might go on to try something a little more complicated, such as the following analogically paralleled likenesses. (I told my students that I had done this next one while shaving, thinking the revelation would bring great acclaim for the quickness of my ingenuity; but they only said that it sounded like it.)

I

the bud of the rose
the bud of the mouth.
the bud of the heart
are petal-pink and soft

II

Time steals the sweetness of the first
deforms the second
destroys the third

III

what is left is
a wavering scent
a curl of lips
a gasp of the heart

IV

then nothing

This, I estimated, would make three or four stanzas, as indicated. I completed it, to make the point that everything in the original skeletal plan won't and doesn't need to get into the final version. In this case, the petal-pinkness and softness go by the boards, so too the waver of the scent and the gasp of the heart; but the essential form remains.

What bud the rose lifts fealty
Lips bring to sweeter flower.
The heart too has its blossom
If only for an hour.

For Time, the dainty cutpurse,
Grants rosebuds but a breath,
Sets petalled lips to curling,
And to the heart gives death.

Bud's scent, lip's curl, heart's aching
Bud, lip and heart bewray;
While soft, beyond, and mincing
Time goes his murderous way.

After this initial introduction to the need of a bone structure, the next step is an explanation of rhyme (standard enough) and, most emphatically, a training in intonation and stress for the purposes of rhythm. The student should know the essentials of scansion, of course, but no one can compose proper rhythm by bare knowledge of the theory any more than one can dance, play basketball or golf by means of drawing board, chart and compass. You have to *hear* the beat.

One cannot say that the difficulties which Filipinos students find in metrical rhythm is due to a lack of a sense of beat, else how explain the innumerable skilled combos and the high proficiency in the dance? It is a deficiency in the sense of *verbal* beat that is responsible and this is understandable enough (indeed, inevitable) in an environment in which most students' primary language is not English but one or another of the dialects or Spanish: each of which has its own particular rhythm but one quite different from that of English, especially American English. Anyone who has listened to supposedly proficient speakers of English doing announcements on the radio or TV will recognize the difficulty. The following indicate the (erroneous) stress given in each case by pause, heightened intonation and emphasis.

"Even after the first LONGdrink..." (Sounds like the name of a town: Longdrink, New Mexico.)

"You LIKE it, it LIKES you..."

"THEE station OF the Masters..."

In such circumstances vocal and aural training must be given in the proper English accent and intonation so that the student learns to *hear the beat* of at least the simple metrical forms which he will use. I recommend such poets as Housman, Robinson, Masefield, Frost, for this purpose and further urge that the training be done by memory assignments in which delivery of the right beat and intonation be graded equally with the grade for the naked remembering. Then a stage will be reached in which all but the most leftfooted students can strike out their own rhythm, using knowledge of scansion only for the final checkout. Whatever you do, don't let them get away with a complete ducking of the problem of rhythm by writing "free verse". The rule here is: free verse (which is after all a more subtle employment of the traditional rhythmical values) is graduate-level, not novice, poetry and is to be attempted only by those who have proven their prior proficiency in the traditional skills.

Plan prepared and beat prepared for, we come to the writing of the poem. There is space here for only a few indications of procedure, done by taking the writing of a single stanza as sample.

For the student there is immense advantage in writing the stanza's final line first. This ensures that the essential statement is already complete and keeps the stanza conveniently end-stopped.

Flutters the butterfly.

Such a basic image, simply stated, allows for perfect freedom of development within the first three lines without any foreign entanglements being contracted. This is done by the use of appositional phrases to qualify the butterfly or his fluttering. Out of a dozen or more possibles any three can be selected without their in any way involving the others.

High, through a mesh of branches,
Whirling up yet more high,
A splash of scarlet on cobalt,
Flutters the butterfly.

The first line sets the scene and gives the viewpoint: we are looking up at the fluttering butterfly in a woodland. The second line adds only the idea of his going ever upwards and thus, for strength, needs something more sharply descriptive of the motion than simply *whirling*. The third line gives an added visual touch—that of color—where only motion and the background were hitherto limned. No lepidopterist I, I need a color for the beast in question which will be plausible and yet will also give a good contrast against the sky; and will shortly adopt a way out which is patently craven.

Rewriting gives:

High, through a *net* of branches,
Swirling up yet more high,
A splash of *plaid* against *azure*,
Flutters the butterfly.

Net in line one is better than *mesh* (or a possible *nest*) because it gives the idea of the trees trying to contain the flight—and thus introduces the idea of struggle against odds for possible use in Stanza 2. *Swirling* in line two adds something to *whirling* (a liquidity of motion) but is still not strong enough so I suggest we bring up *flutter* from line four and add a likeness (real enough) to the motion of the snowflake. *Azure* in line three gives a better contrast of color than cobalt. A splash *against* or *upon* is only a posed scene, a canvas; *into* will make the color touch a living part of the action.

So we finally have:

High, through a net of branches,
Flake-fluttering yet more high,
A splash of plaid into azure,
Swirls up the butterfly.

There were eight word changes even after the original form was set; and more tinkering would bring about further refinement. To make the students see the value of such tinkering in improved meaning and tone is half the battle.

Such a simple stanza as this *can* be written—and re-written over and over—by nearly every student, if the careful preparatory steps are followed. This task of “writing a poem”, even unsuccessfully accomplished, unquestionably improves every student’s future compositions. All profit from a heightened awareness of word and phrase values and of the inner workings of sentence organization.

H. B. FURAY

The PTUC and the KMP

The following communication from the General Secretary of the Philippine Trade Unions Council (PTUC) was received last August by the Editors:

We have come upon a copy of PHILIPPINE STUDIES for April 1961 (Vol. 9, No. 2) and our attention was called to an article entitled “Philippine Labor Unions” by John J. Carroll.

The article in question is quite enlightening and it contains certain illuminating passages. However, we would like to correct an inaccuracy contained in the first paragraph on page 245, which we quote:

The PTUC was for a short time a part of the KMP¹ and both of them owe their origin in part at least to outside influence: the U.S. International Cooperation Administration in the case of the PTUC and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions in the case of the KMP.

The PTUC was created in 1954 upon the initiative of different existing labor unions including those which subsequently withdrew and joined the KMP. The PTUC absolutely does not owe its origin to the U.S. International Cooperation Administration. The latter has definitely nothing to do either with the birth or the present operations of the PTUC.

In 1959, in its desire to bring about unity and solidarity in the Philippine trade union movement, the PTUC agreed to work hand in

¹ Katipunan ng Manggagawang Pilipino.