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Within Words

Making Students at Home in the Language of Literature

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TEACH IN A ONE-HUNDRED-YEAR-OLD BUILDING. Red brick, ivy, hardwood floors. It looks every inch the school. When it was renovated six or seven years ago, a drop-down ceiling appeared in my third-floor classroom to hide the galvanized duct work. The ceiling was uneven, with two different levels, creating an unsightly fault line running the length of my classroom. It was ugly as sin.

In retrospect, I'm grateful. The ugliness needed covering, and that drop-down panel became the "Quote Schism," as my students and I plastered it with choice words we encountered in our reading. Now, when they daydream or drift, their eyes can alight on words from Samuel Johnson: "Wonder is a pause of reason."

The panel has also become a favored tool, a template of our time together. We have D.H. Lawrence coaching us: "Never trust the teller. Trust the tale." Barbara Everett provides a useful handle for irony—it's simply "hypocrisy with style." A little Buddhism, via John Lennon, gives us our primary rule regarding attendance and attention: "Be here now." And from Coleridge, our working definition of poetry: "The best words in their best order." The phrases hover near the ceiling, framing the room, embodying the extent to which we live within language.

There's a cold October rain outside the window, flickering past the dwindling leaves of ivy. A poem awaits the students as they file in. Its 16 words are listed on the board in alphabetical order:

A, An, Are, But, Can, Emergency, Faith, Fine, Gentlemen,
In, Invention, Is, Microscopes, Prudent, See, When

Clearly, this order is not their best.

"I imagine you know all these words," I announce as a straggler finds her seat.

Michael Bazzett teaches at the Blake School in Minneapolis, where he lives with his wife and two children. His poems have appeared widely in small presses, in journals such as Green Mountains Review, the Chattahoochee Review, and Rattle. New work is forthcoming in Free Verse, MacGuffin, Flyway, and Weber: The Contemporary West, and his poetry was recently selected for inclusion in Best New Poets 2008, ed. Mark Strand (Meridian/University of Virginia). He spent last year on sabbatical with his family, writing in central Mexico, which is where "Within Words" came into its final form.

“These are the ingredients of a poem. The exact ingredients. They are ‘the best words,’ as Coleridge might say it. Put them in ‘their best order,’ and immortality is yours.”

The rest of the class is looking at the board and nodding. They’re juniors, in an A.P. literature seminar, and I can see them already trying to figure out the game, discern the pattern.

“Or at least you think you know all these words,” I add, nodding toward the dictionaries on the table. A handful of Ziploc bags are nested there as well, each containing the 16 words, cut into paper rectangles for the visual and tactile learners among us.

“These are the ingredients of a poem. The exact ingredients. They are ‘the best words,’ as Coleridge might say it. Put them in ‘their best order,’ and immortality is yours.”

“That’s it?” asks Kat.

“That’s it. Use each word only once. Punctuation and capitalization are up to you.” I hold up the hardcover brick of a *Norton Anthology*, smiling. “If you’re successful, you’ll be anthologized.”

“It’s a lifelong dream,” says Will wryly.

“I suspected as much,” I say.

“Can we work in partners?” ask Chloe and Ella, almost simultaneously.

“As long as you’re willing to share the enormous cash prize.”

The room is suddenly a hive of energy, in spite of the rain outside. I watch over Will’s shoulder as he separates the words, grouping them by parts of speech, approaching the dilemma like a chemistry problem. Lila idly taps her pencil on the top of her head and narrows her gaze, pondering. Martin has simply plunged in, writing phrases and talking to himself. “Prudent. Prudent student. Is that like prudish?”

It’s as if he’s waiting to overhear something good. I slide a dictionary toward him.

Chloe and Ella have grabbed a baggie and are rearranging the words on the top of a desk. It would be hard to say, exactly, whether they are working or playing. Leo is staring at the board, an empty notebook in his lap, apparently doing nothing.

“Who wrote it?” asks Kyle, as I circle the room.

“If I tell you, then I’d have to kill you.”

“Thanks,” he says.

“My pleasure.”

After 15 minutes, Kat’s looping script has already filled a page, and she and Natalie are laughing as I approach. “Listen to this,” says Natalie, and reads,

**In microscopes
fine gentlemen can see faith
but when an invention is prudent...**

She pauses portentously.

“That’s promising,” I say.

Then Kat announces, “The last line’s not so good, though.” And she reads,

Are emergency a.

The two girls look at one another and burst into laughter.

“It doesn’t exactly sing,” I say. “But I like the notion that microscopes could see faith. Maybe you can play with that?”

Next door, Chloe and Ella have a line strung across the desk like train cars.

When a fine gentlemen is prudent...

“It doesn’t work,” says Chloe, frowning. “It’s gentlemen, with an e.”

“How about this—” says Ella, shifting words around so that it reads:

When fine gentlemen are prudent...

“That’s good,” says Chloe. She looks up at me with a smile. “This is hard.”

“Yes,” I say, and then I point to Orson Welles’ addition to the Schism, “The absence of limitations is the enemy of all art.”

Chloe nods, still smiling. She gets it.

Ostensibly, these students are learning to read literature with subtlety and write with cogency. They’re learning to encapsulate and analyze. They’ll be filling in hollow ovals to that effect in May, with a No. 2 pencil. It might be safer to simply read Dickinson’s poem, unpack the images, see if they could tune their ears to its sly irony. I could talk about attention to detail, point out that one of the multiple meanings of “invention” is *fabrication* or *falsehood*. I could nudge them toward discussing the relationship between form and content, or other abstractions adults introduce so readily into high school classrooms. But the kids are inhabiting that dialogue now, instead of simply mouthing the words.

“How’s it going, Will?”

“I have a few questions,” he says, pushing his notebook toward me. And there they are, in his impossibly neat handwriting.

Can microscopes see faith in an invention?

Are prudent gentlemen fine?

“That’s good,” I say, pushing the notebook back toward him. “How would you answer those questions?”

Will shrugs and takes the notebook up again.

After 30 minutes, Leo says in his unassuming way, “Got it.”

“What do you mean?” says Martin, turning to face him.

“I got it. I used all 16 words.”

“Really?” says Will.

“And it makes sense?” says Lila.

“Why don’t you read it for us, Leo?”

“Can I just write it on the board?”

“I’ll write it for you, while you read,” I say.
As Leo quietly intones the words, I copy out the following:

When gentlemen are prudent,
Faith can see.
But in an emergency,
“Microscopes is a fine invention.”

Leo shrugs, “You have to say the last line like Popeye.”

The class laughs. Leo soaks it in. But they’re also impressed. He’s begun to make sense of the ingredients. In fact, he’s glimpsed the soul of the poem. A snippet of it, at least. I have the Dickinson poem ready to hand out, but then I check myself, not wanting to step on the moment. Instead, we examine the possibilities of Leo’s poem for the last few minutes of class, and when he walks out of the classroom that afternoon, he seems a little taller.

The next day the sun is out. It’s a golden autumn afternoon, crisp as an apple. The same 16 words are on the board as the students enter, this time in “their best order.”

“Faith” is a fine invention
When Gentlemen can see,
But Microscopes are prudent
In an Emergency.

The students sit and read it silently. Natalie opens her notebook to copy it down. A few others follow suit. You can almost feel the sense of completion, the collective sigh. Discussing the poem not only feels natural now, but necessary. On a certain level, it’s a poem they’ve all been trying to write—discovering it here, complete, is as much an act of wonder as it is recognition.

I believe in teaching students how to get inside poetry, how to write it. Even among high school English teachers, it’s not such a common notion. I could be pedantic and point out that poetry is the original pulse of language, how its rhythms are based on the heartbeat we heard in the womb. I could assert that as mere fingerlings, we lived within the drumbeat of language, and as long as our blood is pumping, that beat continues within us, but...

But.

But.

Yes, there are the buts: poetry is obscure, freighted, difficult, cryptic. It’s boring, stultifying, leaden. It reeks of officialdom. It’s over the top. It’s rarefied, antiquated, not particularly useful. Students fear it, shut down when they see it.

But it’s also wonderful.

And when you teach students the elements of writing poetry, you teach them how to read. You teach them how to pay attention to detail, how to get inside words and own them. You help them say things that they didn’t even know they knew.

It's late November and the leaves are gone. The students are confronted with apparent tragedy as they walk into the room. There are two phrases on the board:

The boy with one leg

The girl with one eye

Beside them is the ominous heading:

Interesting things happen when you break the spine

"What's going on here?" I ask.

The students look at one another nervously.

"It doesn't look good," ventures Will.

"No, it doesn't," I agree. "Any ideas on how to turn things around?"

"Call an ambulance," says Martin.

"What if we do this?" I ask, turning to add the following, on a new line, beneath each of the phrases.

The boy with one leg

over the fence—

The girl with one eye

on the clock—

Interesting things happen when you break the spine
of a sentence.

We're working on enjambment, that element of verse where the line breaks but the flow of the sentence persists. The students felt it for that first uncomfortable moment. They spent a little time inside the pause between the two lines, artificially lengthened. First the line resonated one way. Once completed, it resonated another.

Now they're smiling, shaking their heads at the cornball theatrics, playing around with the concept, another tool in their poet's belt. After a few minutes, I invite them to share the results.

From Leo:

I've always been good at having money
problems.

From Natalie:

There is only one person in the world
who knows the truth.

From Will:

Yesterday, at practice, I kicked him
the ball.

From Ella:

It's also been a dream of mine to kill
time for a living.

In a few minutes, when we read Wislawa Szymborska's poem, "The Experiment," I won't need to point out how the enjambment creates a meaning of its own, how something as simple as a line break can generate tension and ambiguity.

With any luck, I won't have to speak much at all.

When the teacher is the expert in the room, poetry can quickly become a cryptic, complicated package that needs unpacking or dissecting. Much of the fear and difficulty associated with reading poetry stems quite naturally, I think, from this commonplace approach.

Billy Collins skewers its effects in his "Introduction to Poetry," where a teacher invites a group of students to "walk inside the poem's room / and feel the walls for a light switch." But all they're interested in doing is tying the poem to a chair and torturing a confession out of it, and "they begin beating it with a hose / to find out what it really means." Putting meaning in a box is why they have the No. 2 pencils. It's what they've been trained to do.

Zbigniew Herbert illuminates this dynamic as well, in the opening lines of his prose poem, "Episode in a Library":

A blond girl is bent over a poem. With a pencil sharp as a lance she
transfers words onto a white sheet of paper and translates them into
lines, accents, caesuras. The fallen poet's lament now looks like a sala-
mander gnawed by ants.

We might hope the words of the fallen poet would live on. That's one of the timeless functions of poetry, after all. But a living, breathing thing can't be dissected, so we're left with tortured confessions and deceased amphibians. Is it any wonder that English teachers are so often accused of beating dead horses?

February. Icicles rim the eaves in this longest, shortest month of the year. We're in the midst of *Hamlet*. Something's rotten, but there's no discussion today. Instead, we've cleared the desks and students are crossing the room in buoyant strides, alternately stepping on the five Xs taped to the floor, chanting phrases as they go.

"I went downtown today and bought a car," says Will.

"Good," I nod. "That scans perfectly."

There is a pause, and then Ella gives it a try: "And yesterday I went and bought some cheese."

Everyone laughs at her stress on the word *cheese*.

We're doing the "Pentameter Walk," improvising iambic lines to try to get inside the metrics of Shakespeare's blank verse.

There's a pause before Lila steps out: "I think this class is really, really strange."

I watch Martin counting in his head before he says: “It’s really, really, really, really strange.”

It’s more Seuss than Shakespeare, but it works.

And then it’s Chloe’s turn: “But repetition’s just a way to cheat.”

There’s an appreciative pause, and I’m tempted to mention, “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,” but I let it pass. They’re starting to feel the pattern, learning Shakespeare with their legs.

“Okay,” I say, “now let’s try some lines from the play and see what happens.”

Kyle steps up, and of course, there is only one line that comes to mind.

“To be or not to be, that is the quest—Hey!” He stops, befuddled. “It doesn’t fit.”

I nod and smile.

“There’s an extra bump,” says Kyle. “He broke the rules.”

“Well,” I shrug. “Is it stressed or unstressed?”

“Unstressed,” says Ella. “You don’t say ques-TION.”

“Unless you have a bad French accent,” quips Martin.

“That’s called a feminine ending,” I explain after the chuckling dies down.

“When a line ends with an unstressed, eleventh syllable.”

“So it’s not breaking the rules?” asks Kyle.

“No.”

“Why do it?” asks Will.

“Good question,” I say, writing Hamlet’s line on the board. “What are the stressed syllables in the line?”

The class calls them out and I underline them.

Chloe’s eyes light up. “That’s so cool,” she says, almost to herself.

“What’s so cool?” asks Kat.

“Look,” she points. “It’s like a hidden message. Be, Not Be, Is Quest. There’s a quest inside the question.”

There’s a quiet moment as the class takes it in: Chloe’s gem, unearthed by the drumbeat of the pentameter. The thought of the young prince being on a quest opens up a new window into the play—thus far, his inaction had seemed just the opposite.

“Be, Not Be, Is Quest,” repeats Martin admiringly. “Sounds like Yoda.”

From Martin, there is no higher praise.

We’re in the midst of *Hamlet*. Something’s rotten, but there’s no discussion today. Instead, we’ve cleared the desks and students are crossing the room in buoyant strides, alternately stepping on the five Xs taped to the floor, chanting phrases as they go. We’re doing the “Pentameter Walk,” improvising iambic lines to try to get inside the metrics of Shakespeare’s blank verse.

When we encourage students to approach literature as writers as well as readers, we give them the gift of hearing themselves in the words they read. They connect more readily to the actual diction of the piece, not merely the impression it makes upon

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active things, constructed to achieve a certain effect. Things that do something to you. If students can consider what a work of literature is doing to them, and how, then they've begun to read on a very thoughtful level. The writing and the reading dance with one another. The poetry strengthens the prose.

It's the end of May. Exams have come and gone. The school is draped in the tender green of new ivy. Another year has turned on its hinge.

I'm sitting in my classroom, reviewing end-of-year assessments and considering changes for next year, but I keep pausing to stare out the window, lulled by two of the loveliest words in the English language:

Almost summer.

I'll be turning to my own reading and writing soon. In the meantime, I have the words of Martin and Kat, Natalie and Will, Leo and Chloe, and all the others to keep me company. My thoughts turn expansive as they often do at the end of May. I smile and wonder at the notion of encouraging future engineers and managers, and butchers and bakers and candlestick-makers, to aspire to poetry.

Maybe the best reason is up there, on the Schism. It's a remnant from grad school, a quote from Wittgenstein:

"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world."

I turn and look out the window again, to the green treetops and the horizon beyond. It is not just in a third-floor classroom that we live within words. They house our thoughts and our selves. If we deepen our relationship with them, if we engage their poetry—then we step through the door of the classroom into a larger world. 

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