



Letting Invention Have Its Way

A Discussion and Collaborative Exercise with Poet Brian Turner

SUSAN KARWOSKA

“POETRY CAN BE HARD TO DO—it can be difficult to dive into,” says poet Brian Turner. “But when you collaborate on a poem it’s like being a little kid again, playing with language.”

For the past several years Turner has sought to bring this collaborative spirit to his poetry workshops by introducing group projects that rekindle his students’ sense of playfulness in writing. These collaborations not only encourage his students to take chances they might not otherwise take, he says, but also help them gain a deeper understanding of poetry.

Turner first began doing collaborative work with his students when he found that so many of them felt uncomfortable sharing their work. “Doing a collaborative poem was a way of addressing the frustration I felt about this. I wanted to know what they were thinking! I

wanted to create more of a group experience in our discussions of writing and poetry and form.” At first, he asked his students to write just part of a poem. The idea was to free them up by encouraging them to turn in something unfinished. But once he began collecting these fragments, it seemed a natural next step to put them together to make a collaborative poem. “I was very excited by the idea,” he says, “because writing is so often a solitary thing; we go into the cave, or up to the top of the mountain, and then come back with this piece, this insight into something, but it seemed like maybe we could learn from the collective as well. And that it could be fun!”

Bringing the sense of fun back into the creative process, says Turner, has a serious purpose. “I want my students to take pleasure from the experience of writing. If they have that experience once, they might decide to come back to it sometime, to poetry and writing in general. We don’t often give ourselves the space and time for art, for experimenting. But it can give these students a healthy place from which to look at what might be some of the most difficult things in their lives.” Turner speaks from experience: his recently published first book of poems, *Here, Bullet*, uses poetry as a lens through which to view the time he spent as a US soldier in Iraq.

Turner builds each class collaboration around a poetic form, usually the ode. “It gives structure to the class,” he says, “but also, on a deeper level, I use forms

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Brian Turner is the author of Here, Bullet, a first-person account of the Iraq War. He earned an MFA from the University of Oregon and lived abroad in South Korea for a year before serving for seven years in the US Army. He was an infantry team leader for a year in Iraq, beginning November 2003. Prior to that, he was deployed to Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1999–2000. His poetry has been published in Poetry Daily, The Georgia Review, and other journals, and in the Voices in Wartime Anthology published in conjunction with the feature-length documentary film of the same name. He received a 2007 NEA Literature Fellowship in Poetry.

because I find that many students are hesitant to use them or are intimidated by them—they think it takes years of practice or that you need to read lots of books to understand them, and I want to debunk a bit of that myth. I mean, it’s true, you can spend years learning about form, but you can find pleasure and meaning in it sooner than you might expect, as well as the start of some mastery and understanding. Many of the poetic forms I use are really old and simple, but a lot of writers have never really sat down with them.”

The process of collaboration—taking fragments and putting them together to see what you have—provides a parallel to the individual art-making process, and helps us understand it better, says Turner. His own work benefits as well: “I’m inspired by the linguistic flexibility I see from my students. It pushes me to relax my own thinking and try to play more with writing myself, so that invention can have its way.”

Writing a Collaborative Ode in the Classroom

1. Give a Brief History of the Form

“When we do the ode I’ll explain to the class how it is a classic form that’s been handed down through the centuries,” says Turner. “There are Greek odes and a Spanish style. There are Pindaric and Homeric odes, and different formal structures that you can follow. I tell them that if they’re interested they can look up the history of the ode later and find out more detail, but the basic thing I try to teach them is the underlying skeleton of the [Pindaric] ode, which is a three-part structure: the *strophe*, the *antistrophe*, and the *epode*.”

2. Explain the Form

“If they want, they can look up the structure of an ode in the *Princeton Dictionary of Poetic Terms* but I try to simplify it for them—give them the Brian-Turner-from-Fresno definition.

“The first section is called the *strophe*. It is the set-up, the initial entry into the world of the poem. This can be physical and visual—the imaginary realm of the poem as well as the musical phrasing that’s set up. Usually the first couple of lines let you know how deep a breath you have to take, and give the rhythmic pulse, and that sets

the musical expectation for the rest of the poem.

“The second section is called the *antistrophe*. This is usually where the poem takes a turn. In Greek odes, this is where the Greek chorus would turn in a certain way, and that’s where the idea of the antistrophe comes from. By taking a turn I mean expanding the ideas set up in the strophe and going off into the imagination, into the unexpected.

“The third section is called the *epode*, which—again, simplified—is a new place.”

3. Give Examples

“I have an ode in my book called “In the Leupold Scope,” and there’s one by Edward Hirsch that may or may not be an ode but I would argue that it has an ode structure, called “For the Sleepwalkers.” I use this to make the point that they can use different line forms, but the underlying rhetorical structure guides the development of the poem.”

4. Decide on a Title/Subject for the Poem

“For the subject of the poem—it’s sort of free form—I might think about a place, or a time, or an event. I think that introducing difficulty can sometimes take some of the jokiness out of the poem. There are all different prompts you can give—I like to mix it up and have fun with it. Also, when you talk to the students beforehand, you get a feel for the place. Maybe I saw something interesting in the town that I’m curious about. So I’ll create a prompt to try to come up with the very first line of the poem, and that’s also the first line of the strophe. Once we have that very first line—usually it’s an open-ended kind of thing, like ‘On the Redline to Braintree,’ then we’ll do the same thing for the antistrophe, then for the epode. Sometimes I will offer up an idea for the first line of the epode as well. Now we will have three starting lines, one for each section. They’re really just points of departure, something the students can step off of, can start riffing off of.”

5. Divide Students into Groups and Assign Parts

“Each group works on one section of the ode. I clarify that although each group is working on its own specified section, each writer in the group is working on their own

lines. They are not writing the lines together.

“I give the first lines to the groups and give them time to work on the lines that will follow. The amount of time I give them depends on how much time we have in the class. Even with a short time, though, you can probably get through all the preliminary stuff in fifteen minutes—you can give just the basic information and then let the students write. While they are working, I try to stay out of their business and not talk to them.”

6. Introduce “Negation”

“I’ll stop the writing when we still have some time left so that I can teach them a poetic strategy—what I call the poetry of negation—that’s been very effective throughout time, and also, since World War I, very common, starting with Wilfred Owen’s poem ‘Dulce et Decorum Est.’ Different teachers can find different examples of this technique. In Owen’s poem, he talks about the wounded soldiers who have been gassed in the trenches; they’re fleeing the battlefield and many of the wounded have been flung into the back of a wagon in the mud. The narrator of the poem is walking behind it, and he can see these men who have been wounded struggling and he says, ‘If in some smothering dreams you too could pace / Behind the wagon that we flung him in / And watch the white eyes writhing in his face’ and then he goes on in vivid detail to say what you would see. The rhetorical strategy there is that he starts with ‘if’ and then describes this nightmarish sight in very vivid detail so that we feel we can see it, but he knows, and he’s noting to us, that we can’t. It’s not possible.

“Sometimes I’ll use the example of one of my own poems called “Curfew” where I talk about a day in Iraq

where children are stringing laundry on the line, policemen are sunbathing on a traffic island, and there’s nothing really happening. And then I say, ‘There were no bombs, no panic in the streets.’ And I get even more specific: Sergeant Gutierrez didn’t comfort an injured man / who cupped pieces of his friend’s brain / in his hands...’

“I’m saying these things did not happen that day, but imply that they could have. So I try to teach them this technique of saying something that’s not happening, or that’s impossible, and in so doing, you make this imaginative possibility come alive in the reader’s mind. Now it’s a very common technique and once you start looking for it you see it constantly.

“At this point I’ll ask the students to go back to the section they were working on and write its opposite. So if they said, ‘On the Redline to Braintree I saw an old man fall asleep.’ They might write, ‘On the Redline to Braintree an old man woke up, looked at me, surprised...’. Something like that. And that gives me lots of material to work with once I collect the lines and go to put them together.”

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7. Collect the Lines and Assemble the Poem

“At the end of the class, I gather all the lines up and take them home so I have a quiet place to figure out how to put the pieces together. That’s my part. I’m like the stew-master. Each student has at least one line in the poem. When I’m finished compiling the lines into the poem I’ll distribute it to the students who contributed.”

The final product, says Turner, never fails to inspire him. “When I compile and put the poems together, there has not been a single time when I haven’t said, ‘Wow—that’s a cool poem. I wish I’d written that myself!’” 🍷