

# The Crisis in the Classroom

## AT CLOSE OF DAY

by Rachel DeWoskin

On Wednesday, September 12<sup>th</sup>, an advanced poetry student of mine asked to workshop an occasional poem. It was only our second meeting of the semester, and I had spent the first class suggesting that poetry is not about catharsis or self-help, but about discipline, restraint, and revision. To that end, I had asked the class to read an essay by Ezra Pound, in which he discourages unnecessary words and encourages direct treatment of the “thing” (whatever that might be). Faced with my student’s poem, I wondered whether such arguments had been valid or moral ones to make to a group of students who were about to experience Tuesday and its aftermath.

My student’s poem was a graphic account of the tragedy—long, patriotic, and filled with clichés—a poem I might otherwise have addressed as an example of dangerous melodrama. But I found myself at an uncomfortable and unfamiliar impasse. My student claimed that her poem was a response to the media, and I was tempted to make my standard assertion that the language of poetry should not sound like a news report or anthem unless the similarity serves an artistic purpose. I even considered discouraging my students from writing any occasional poetry by saying that poets’ mouths should, as W. B. Yeats once wrote, “be silent, for in truth, we have no gift to set a statesman right.” In “On Being Asked for a War Poem,” Yeats made explicit his feelings about poets pontificating on events:

He has had enough of meddling who can please  
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,  
Or an old man upon a winter’s night.

I soon realized that I could rely entirely on Yeats to solve the dilemma, since in 1916, after the thwarted Easter Uprising in Dublin, he found irresistible the very occasional poetry he had previously disdained. He used the form of the occasional poem not because he needed to borrow drama, but because poetry was the best way to articulate elements missing from the world’s discussion of an event that moved him profoundly. Flanked by the twin forces of “On Being Asked for a War Poem” and “Easter, 1916,” I proposed to my students that occasional poetry is both necessary and difficult.

The challenge for students of poetry is to respond to and incorporate tragedy by creating drama through language and form rather than borrowing it from the events. "Easter, 1916" is a lesson plan in this respect: It is not only an occasional poem, but a masterful articulation of the conflict between disdain for occasional verse and the poet's need to write it.

## OBJECT LESSON

by Matthew Sharpe

Following the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, I wanted to do something with my two Columbia University creative writing classes that addressed the disaster we had all just experienced. Each of the lessons I planned for my first class went awry. I began by asking my students to freewrite for five minutes in response to Billie Holiday's rendition of "Gloomy Sunday." One student asked, "Do we *have* to write about the song?" I sensed she was not alone in resisting the song's abjection. Next, I read them Emily Dickinson's Poem 341 ["After great pain, a formal feeling comes—"]. It became evident to me, as we discussed this difficult poem, that in my haste I hadn't studied it thoroughly enough to guide a group of smart undergraduates through it. Then we tried to talk about a poem one student had written in response to the attacks. This didn't go much better. By the end of the period, and despite everyone's patience, the student was dissatisfied and hurt. I think a lot of us were.

With my second class I took a different approach. On September 4<sup>th</sup>, the first day of the semester, I had given my students an ongoing journal-writing assignment. I got the idea for the assignment from *The Beauty of the Husband*, Anne Carson's book-length narrative poem about a marriage and its collapse. In one of the late chapters, the poem's narrator writes,

There was a branch I used to watch from my back kitchen window  
and gradually began to keep a record of it  
almost every day  
in elegiac couplets,  
for example:

Foaming against its own green Cheek it cools in brief  
or seems to cool each Underleaf

The narrator quotes eight couplets in all, and then writes,

Well I won't bore you with the whole annal.  
Point is, in total so far, 5820 elegiacs.  
Which occupy 53 wirebound notebooks.  
Piled on four shelves in the back kitchen.  
And would take maybe a night and a day and a night to read through.  
With fervor.

That day, I had asked my students to pick an object and write a couplet about it at least three times a week for the next month and a half. I added that a poet could do worse than to emulate this narrator's obsessive behavior, not to mention her fervor.

It had occurred to me as I gave the assignment that the objects my students wrote about might become repositories for whatever events or ideas or feelings were relevant to them while they were writing. On the Tuesday following September 11<sup>th</sup>, I asked if any of them had been able to use their two-line *études* to respond to what had happened to our city. Indeed; some had, and as they read them aloud, I found myself powerfully affected by what I was hearing. I think the concreteness and directness of this tiny form had enabled it, paradoxically, to address the event's monumentality. Here is one about a hand:

A hand lies trembling in the street.  
It has no mouth, it cannot speak;  
It cannot run, it has no feet.

—*John Ray Abernathy*

Sze wrote the first of these two couplets about the view from her window on Monday the 10<sup>th</sup>, the day before the attack; the second she wrote on Saturday the 15<sup>th</sup>, after a day of rain:

Sitting quietly with a faraway look,  
a child immersed in a book,

The stars are back tonight but  
the child is not in sight.

—*Sze Kwan Chan*

Sasha wrote her couplets about a fish:

I am seeing the same thing everywhere—  
My fish's body, too, unfurled like a red banner.

—*Sasha Heroy*

Katherine's object was the window of her dorm room:

Slightly cracked, the shades halfway blinding the storm-darkened sky  
Am I safe behind the glass?

I see through it the tree with leaves falling one by one  
Like the tears from my heart when I remember

—*Katherine Griffith*