

## SPECIMEN DAYS

T&W Writer Spotlight: Tina Cane

# Meditations on White Space

Several years ago at the University of Paris, I attended a lecture on Stéphane Mallarmé, which emphasized the importance of *les blancs* (or the white spaces) in his poetry. Until then, I had viewed *les blancs* as empty spaces, not as active complements to the space assumed by words. This new approach influenced how I read, wrote, and later taught poetry. To mindfully appreciate the shape a poem carves onto a page is to view its words and lines in relief, to consider how the contours of a poem contribute to its meaning.

For three years now, I have been using *les blancs* to introduce poetry to K–12 students in Queens, New York. The notion of blank space as a defining element of poetry is simple yet radical, and has proven to be a subtle challenge to students who tend to define poetry as beautiful rhymes about feelings and love. During the first class of a residency, I play devil's advocate, asking students if short stories, novels, and newspaper articles can likewise contain beautiful rhymes about feelings and love. Once the class agrees that they can, I challenge them to find a more definitive distinction between prose and poetry.

To assist in this experiment, I hold up a printed poem and invite students to take a good look at the white space around the text. I do the same with a page of prose and ask them if, even from afar, they discern a difference. After a few rounds of visually comparing poetry's often jagged, irregular forms to the more uniform blocks of prose, students begin to perceive space as an active distinction. When I turn a poem on its side, they even begin to see staircases and rolling landscapes.

Like Bemelmans's Madeline, who spots a rabbit in the cracking ceiling above her hospital bed, elementary-age children squint and find all kinds of wonderful shapes in the body of a poem. I have found this approach particularly liberating for more visually inclined students, who are frequently intimidated by poetry's dense verbal content. Noticing the diverse configurations of negative space also offers a convenient segue to talking about calligrammes and haiku, in which we link form to content, liken page to canvas, line to brush stroke. Showing students a poem typed out as prose—alongside the original—is also an effective illustration of *les blancs* (Pablo Neruda's *Odes to Common Things* works well). Students enjoy watching a poem recover its line and stanza breaks, as well as recognizing how these affect the way they read it.

A free association exercise I call "Springboard" is a fun way to facilitate wordplay and experimentation with *les blancs*. For starters, I choose a word (usually from the classroom's "word wall"), write it on the board, and count one, two, three—go! For about five minutes my students write down all the words that spring to their minds from that single word. I implore the students "not to think," and suggest that if they get blocked, they should look up and write down the first color they see. They enjoy the speed-writing aspect of this exercise and the license to stop making sense. The second part of Springboard requires the students to draw a large rectangle on the other side of their paper and then number, one through twelve, their favorite words from the list. Here I mention briefly that we may be attracted to a word for its sound, meaning, look, or connotation. Then I invite them to fit these words, any way they like, in the blank space of the rectangle. Unusual configurations, absurd combinations, and the melding of several words into one are encouraged with a simple "the stranger, the better."

Reading aloud and holding up our rectangles, we discuss why we favored certain words, why we placed them where we did, and how those choices influenced the final product. In wrapping up the exercise, it's imperative to point out that we have yet to compose a poem, but that we are moving in that direction.

*Les blancs* is also helpful when students are slow to shift gears from writing paragraphs to composing lineated poems. For students who feel more secure working from the left to right margin, I encourage them to add white space and line breaks around the words (and images) they want to emphasize for sound, look, or meaning. Here's an example by Israel Hidalgo, a third grader from P.S. 2 in Queens:

I like poetry. It feels like a puppy's fur. Poetry barks, jumps, runs  
and smells like flowers and is soft. It looks black and white to me.  
Poetry makes me feel free like a bird. It makes me want to fly in the air.

Here is Israel's text refashioned into a poem:

I like poetry  
it feels  
like a  
puppy's fur  
poetry

barks  
 jumps  
 runs and  
 smells like flowers  
 and is soft it looks black and white to  
 me poetry makes me feel free like  
 a bird it makes me want to fly in the air

Most often, however, students are eager from the start to spin their poems into spiral shapes and skylines. For many, including sixth grader Katherine Cabrera, it's a gestural process akin to drawing:

#### Oda a Mi Diario

Mi diario es algo glorioso  
 por su belleza mi diario es  
 mi amigo y compañía  
 cuando escribo al go  
 sagrado y bendito  
 él es fiel a mi  
 cuando lo  
 agarro me da  
 más fuerza  
 a desahogar-  
 me y lo  
 veo  
 como  
 una  
 dama  
 cariñosa

mi diario se merece algo  
 mejor que yo

The notion of space as a defining element in poetry, however, is best used as a *point de départ*. For concrete thinkers, a concrete approach like *les blancs* makes poetry accessible without closing the door to later, more nuanced discussions. How involved those discussions are, of course, depends on the class. The real fun (and confusion) begins when they discover the prose poem.