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A Poetics of Student Writing

Cover Page Footnote

Dennis Young is Visiting Assistant Professor at George Mason University where he teaches a range of writing and literature courses and where he recently won the University Teaching Excellence Award.

A Poetics of Student Writing

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Thus we begin to recognize in ourselves that eros and psyche are not mere figures in a tale, not merely configurations of archetypal components, but are two ends of every psychic process. They always imply and require each other. We cannot view anything psychologically without an involvement with it: we cannot be involved with anything without it entering our soul.

— James Hillman *The Myth of Analysis*

Perhaps the most overlooked aspect of student writing is the poetic or aesthetic. Poetic writing clearly involves more than the strict literary definition, also including prose that pushes the boundaries of expression, that works imagistically, that speaks with passion, that works at the level of soul. It is writing that has the powerful ability to open up access to worlds and insights. The “poetics” of my title refers then to the soul-making, aesthetic dimension of student writing. The word soul—the best translation of the Greek word *psyche*—resonates with possibilities for describing what takes place when students grapple with perspective, subjectivity, and interpretation. Soul, with its rich tradition of cultural and literary connotation, refers to aesthetics, imagination, attitude, a way of being in the world, not a substance or thing itself. Soul involves the imaginative possibilities of a reflective perspective, “a *deepening* of events into experience” (Hillman, *Re-visioning* x).

The student work I examine in the first half of this essay reveals a passionate urgency that attends serious reflection on writing, learning, and being itself, revealing that students are stunningly capable of penetrating insight and imaginative power. Coming to terms with this level of discourse necessitates hermeneutical inquiry: this means I have to let the “text speak” (Gadamer, “Writing” 65) by seeking textual understanding but also self-understanding. In the second half of the essay, I develop an interpretive frame, attempting what Gadamer calls a “fusion of horizons” (a notion I’ll return to), the goal being to open up a productive dialogue concerning student writing. So this essay is about three students’ attempts at gaining self-understanding in language and my endeavour to engage the dialogue that their writing calls for.

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Reflection as Insight

At the very end of each semester in my writing classes, I ask students to compose an in-class essay reflecting on themselves as writers. This is the one unrevised and ungraded essay of the term. By encouraging students to write about the changes and growth they experienced as writers, learners, and thinkers, I hope they will internalize their learning experience and make meaning their own. “We had the experience but missed the meaning,” T. S. Eliot says in the last of the *Four Quartets* (133). Reflection helps us to recover meaning, to overcome forgetfulness, to get to what happened, to discover and uncover.¹ Reflection, James Hillman reminds us, literally means a “bending back” from the perceptual stimulus in favor of a psychic image. It is a “turning inward” to images and experiences of soul, an act of “becoming conscious” related to eros (*Myth* 84).

Its pedagogical value is clear; reflection is a poetic vehicle for soul-making. As Kathleen Blake Yancey points out in *Reflection in the Writing Class*, “Reflection makes possible a new kind of learning as well as a new kind of teaching” (8). This *new kind of learning* especially interests me. Reflection, unlike much writing in the academic setting, requires that students stop, call their experience to mind, and develop a consciousness of their work. Their essays are often insightful and engaging as students interiorize the learning process. The tenor of the writing changes, the associations often leading to what Gaston Bachelard calls “intimate space” as students recontextualize their learning within their larger life histories. Although I ask them only to consider their work during the course of the semester, students often go much deeper into themselves and their life histories, framing images of struggle, pain, family entanglements, educational dilemmas, and identity. The first is by Christa.²

I wanted to understand the complexities of life. I wanted to be one of the few to obtain the secret to a happy life. I felt that studying philosophy would create a common bond or a sense of unified relatedness between myself and others [. . .] I will never forget when I first told my father about my decision to become a philosophy major. His words will echo throughout my brain forever: “And what the hell are you going to do with that degree?” my father screamed.

Reflection entails a kind of descent into, a *discovery* of oneself. Christa goes on to write about her “quest for learning” and *descends* to an earlier psychological place: “My first memory of craving knowledge was when I was four years old.” She was learning a second language, Greek, and remembers how thrilling it was to “define words on the spot because of my knowledge of another language.” She then discusses her decision to major in philosophy and her father’s

¹ It is worth noting here that for Greek thought the word for truth is *aletheia*, that is, *revealing, uncovering, or disclosure* (Heidegger, *Question 36*). The word is mythic. It means against or contrary to *Lethe*, the river of oblivion in the underworld of death.

² All students that I cite have enthusiastically granted me permission to use their work in this essay. They are given pseudonyms.

subsequent stern resistance. She endured his repeated complaints, feeling humiliation every time she saw him for over a year, but she did not relinquish her original desire to learn. She then says something amazing: "In retrospect, my life seems like a blur with the exception of one thing. My quest for learning remains constant."

Christa may not have been the best writer in the class, but she epitomizes an *insistence* in many students' lives, articulating what so many feel, think, and imagine—that learning is desire, that it provides a focus, that life is "a blur" except for the motivation to learn. She bravely resisted her father's harsh authority to pursue her *calling*, her intellectual vocation, the center of her concerned attention. Christa displays the logic of love, not the logic of normalcy, adjustment, success, or even "happiness." An image of her destiny is packed into this little fragment, a revelation that she simply cannot be who she is without following the intellectual urgency to pursue philosophy (the love of wisdom), to think for herself about what truly matters to her being. I do not want to claim too much from one example, but I see hints of this proclivity in student writing that expresses the need to resist authoritarian strictures and follow a spark of inspiration. Christa made her writing the occasion for engaging intimate and passionate concerns.

Jennifer, an extremely shy and private student who was quite reluctant in the beginning to share her work, slowly opened up during the course of the semester. In almost every piece she wrote, images of her Chinese-American identity somehow came into play. She grappled constantly with her "dual perspective" of Chinese and American values, unsure about her true identity.

When I began this course I had hoped to discover how to control my unruly writings and to tame them into submission but I learned more than expected. In the past I had learned to turn away from my cultural identity instead of embracing it. I kept my life to myself and was abashed at sharing my secrets. Yet, in this class I began to see the glimmerings of what I could possibly accomplish if only I gave myself the chance. [. . .] I can see how my focus has turned from the inward to the outward. No longer concerned with the daily rituals of my life, I have become enmeshed in the net of my identity and who it is I am masquerading as. There are still so many things that I have to sort out but I seem to have found a starting point with this class. So, if my punctuation and grammar still isn't ideal, at least I know my purpose is.

She ends with, "I guess that's what I really *needed* to learn." Jennifer realized her "outward" movement as a kind of assertion of identity and being, a vital psychologizing of experience. Note that Jennifer characterizes the movement toward self-knowledge and being as outward, not inward, a movement away from the boundaries of the withdrawn "daily rituals" of mundane existence toward a complex, multifaceted "net of identity." She revises herself first by recognizing the "masquerade" and sees writing as a starting point for further investigation of identity. Jennifer, like Christa, reveals, recovers, reclaims. Both portray intellectual struggle—the struggle to become who and what they *know* and *feel* they are.

We can call this nothing less than soul-work: the act of putting ourselves face to face with what Gadamer calls openness to language to gain reflective momentum in the process of *Bildung*, self-creation through education (*Truth* xxiii). Writing, after all, has a way of putting us face to face with what we most wish to deny or forget, if it approaches Heideggerian *aletheia*—i.e., truth, unhiddenness, what does not escape notice, what is not easy to forget—that arises from the disclosure that writing makes available.

The very process of writing sometimes seems to mirror another process, that of choosing one's path (or to put it another way, following one's fate). Another reflective student, Daniel, reminds me that revision involves much more than re-seeing an individual piece of prose, that it often involves revising one's values, goals and purposes.

From the start of this course, I knew that I enjoyed writing. Things have not much changed from that first day on that point. But there have been significant changes in other realms of my life (and possible career as a writer). I now know to look at my college career in a whole new light, all from the angle of a writer doing revisions. I have had many disappointments in my long student life, but never did they usually have to do with my ability to write.

He goes on to relate the event of getting a "C" on a paper in anthropology (his major) that he had worked harder on than any paper he'd ever composed. Because of his dedication to writing and scholarship, it was a "humiliation," and, he says, "I almost gave up on school and my ability to be a coherent, clear person." Arising from a moment of crisis, this brilliant insight suggests that clarity and coherence are as much a style of consciousness—a way of being—as they are a writing style. Daniel realised that he had a "second chance. And even more importantly, I have a third and a fourth and a fifth, etc. chances. [. . .] Even though I was grabbed by the ghoul of bad writing last semester, I had the ability to banish him."

Daniel's recognition that revision involves more than rhetorical choices, that one revises one's life stories, struck him as revelatory. He successfully revised his story of academic failure to create a new story that, as he says, "allows me to talk." "And," he triumphantly ends his meditation, "to come to this idea is pure bliss, because I actually feel whole as a writer." This is a person who has connected writing to life, thereby creating a new world for himself.

"A simple image, if it is new, will open an entire world," Bachelard suggests (134). Revising our story makes the world new, too. Their imagistic language resonates with archetypal importance. By paying attention to the images themselves, we perceive an attitude, not an argument. Students turn despair and pain into images that they can live with. This is the language not of ego but of soul, constituting acts of *poeisis*. Christa's *quest for learning* against the *blur* of banal existence, Jennifer's *desire and need to learn* that provided a *starting point* for encountering *the net of identity* and the *masquerading* of the unregenerative self, Daniel's recognition that *revision* constitutes the fitting metaphor for self-understanding and the subsequent *bliss* of feeling *whole*—these images are the language of soul, allegories of identity. They validate Emerson's idea that

The moment our discourse rises above the ground line of familiar facts and is inflamed with passion or exalted by thought, it clothes itself in images. [. . .] Good writing and brilliant discourse are perpetual allegories. This imagery is spontaneous. It is the blending of experience with the present action of the mind. (51-52)

I see this “spontaneous imagery” in these student pieces; they enact the blend of past experience and the immediacy of the soul in action in their reflections.

Recourse to analytical ego psychology with its abstractions, personality indices, types, complexes, and temperaments simply will not suffice to describe what is going on in these images of psyche. Hillman points out that “Every psychological system rests upon a metapsychology, a set of implicit assumptions about the nature of the soul” (*Re-visioning* 200). Could it be that our system of education in general and of the writing class in particular also rests upon assumptions about the nature of soul? To neglect the psychological—or soul—dimension of student experience is to neglect a critical strand in their development, seriously distorting our perspective.

What’s so striking about these reflections is that Christa, Jennifer, and Daniel used the occasion to create a new story. The worlds they open in their reflections reveal writing not so much as power, mastery, and control but as *poesis* (Greek for *imaginative making*) and soul-making. They manage to connect their learning of writing to the essential psychic actuality and insistences in their lives, disclosing images of the soul in action, reminding us of the inherent aesthetic experience of meaning, what Gadamer calls the “truth” of beauty. Gadamer suggests that “the distinguishing mark of the beautiful [is that] it draws directly to itself the desire of the human soul, is founded in its mode of being [. . .]. That being is self-presentation [. . .] an event [of understanding]” (*Truth* 439). Student reflections tell the story that self is not a constant, stable entity but something one becomes in the act of *poesis*, by weaving the threads of multiplicity through writing to help us become who we are. These students engage the aesthetic dimension of themselves, simultaneously encountering eros, the desire that makes dialogue and learning possible.

Interpreting the Writing Psyche

How do we *take* these student utterances; how do we *interpret* them? What do they teach us about teaching and learning writing? What do they suggest to writing teachers who wish to better understand—and we all wish to better understand—students’ struggles? Looked at a certain way, these excerpts are as appealing and problematic as literary texts, provided we treat them as images of students’ minds in action and provided we ourselves enact self-reflection as a way of negotiating the texts. These pieces are imaginative renderings of psyche in the process of learning. I’ve called this writing “soul-work” (following Hillman), and I wish to extend this characterization to include the Heideggerian notion of language as “dwelling,” a way of “being-in-the-world.” In *On the Way to Language* Heidegger speaks of the transformative potential of language: “All reflective thinking is poetic and all poetry is in turn a kind of thinking” (136). By intimately associating reflection with the poetic, Heidegger emphasizes that lan-

guage constitutes *Dasein* (literally, “there being” or “being there”) or the “gathering” of consciousness of being. This notion provides insight into student struggles with language and identity in their texts. In an essay representing Heidegger as an ally of composition studies, Judith Halden-Sullivan points out that “[T]he language of writing, as the saying of Being, discloses human openness to the truth, showing in every nuance the writer’s being-in-the-world” (48). Several other composition theorists have appropriated phenomenology and hermeneutics to interpret the writing class and the educational project of composition studies (see Gere). Briefly, they insist that Heidegger’s views of language—and their elaboration by Gadamer—provide a way to understand student work. Philosophical hermeneutics’ emphasis on language as constituting consciousness makes it particularly congenial to writing pedagogy because, as Heidegger insists in one way or another throughout his work, “Language is the foundation of human being. [. . .] We are, then, within language and with language before all else. [. . .] The point is to experience the unbinding bond within the web of language” (*On the Way* 112, 113). Gadamer in *Philosophical Hermeneutics* expands on Heidegger’s hermeneutical perspective, saying, “Language is the fundamental mode of operation of our being-in-the-world and the all-embracing form of the constitution of the world” (3). Hillman’s insistence on a *poetic* basis of mind, while different from Gadamer’s and Heidegger’s philosophical perspective in its emphasis on myth, psychoanalysis, and reflection, nonetheless, is enhanced and deepened by hermeneutics’ emphasis on language as the aesthetic rendering of being itself.

Read psychologically, as I’ve suggested, these student texts show that learning is a creative, poetic act. They present images of struggle and effort, confronting as they do resistance to contrary forces, whether resistant parents, self- and culturally-limiting notions of identity, or academic systems. They are vignettes—imagistic portraits of student learning—and they are psychological images or, better, images of psyche. Authentically encountering these images requires what Gadamer calls the “fusion of horizons” (*Truth* xix) that occurs when both teachers and students grasp the immediacy of meaning in the text. “The fusion of horizons occurs,” Brenda Deen Schildgen points out, “when dialogue has actually happened” (39). Hermeneutics and psychological theory, then, are preconditions for grasping possible textual meanings. A theory of psyche for teachers means involvement and engagement with the drama of students’ emotional and mental processes as they learn, an act that Gadamer calls “intersubjectivity.” We can imagine ourselves as a part of the whole, participating in student work rather than operating at an analytical distance. The words of interpretation cannot be isolated in any rigorously analytical way from the words of student texts themselves. The interpretive act is never conducted from a distance but is a subjective process of making the text speak by enacting dialogue and reconstruction. “The genuine reality of the hermeneutical process,” Gadamer says, “seems to me to encompass the self-understanding of the interpreter as well as what is interpreted” (*Philosophical* 58).

Is there a writing teacher alive who cannot identify with at least one of these student’s disclosures that writing is an act of resistance and self-creation, a dynamic by which to embody and interpret the needs of psyche? Christa’s at first

timid rebellion against her father's business mentality serves to found her being *against* what she sees as contrary to her calling to learn and to know. Jennifer sees writing as a way to help her embrace her contrary cultural identities in order to assert an actively imaginative self. Daniel imagines his life as a text that can be revised, just as his papers *and* his identity as a student/learner can be revised. As writers, they open themselves to the possibilities of self-projection, recognizing in their work that there is something unfinished in them, that there is still more to be said, and that writing pushes the boundaries of being, propelled by the desire to "know thyself."

Eros, desire, then constitutes the center of our concerned attention. We desire knowledge to fill a void, a deficiency, a lack. The word education suggests as much. *E-ducat-ion* means "to lead out"; "ducat" corresponds to "duct," a passage way, a void to be filled, not as in banking or depositing or filling up but rather fulfilling psyche with the passion of learning and comprehending. Learners, with the help of caring teachers, lead themselves out of one way of thinking, one way of life, into another; they lead themselves out of childhood into newer versions of themselves as adults, and so learning is often fraught with pain. Desire is the impetus propelling the process of leading out. The hermeneutical act of both reading and writing (represented mythically by Hermes, god of messages, hermeneutics, and writing) is infused with the desire (eros) for understanding. Eros is the presiding genius behind the awakening of the imagination.

Reflective writing, the descent into the soul's imaginative world, constitutes a psychic urge, a thirst, an all-consuming desire. These instincts and energies unerringly veer toward Psyche as embodiment of the knowing soul, the activity of the intellect, the emotionally charged urgency and delight of dialogue. Eros brings us to inferiority, to the recognition that we by ourselves are not enough, that we need much more: "The soul hungers for ideas" (Hillman, *Re-visioning* 119). The soul's wants and the desire to learn inescapably point to eros, that which it seems to want most and yet which is also the origin of what we want. Like Martin Buber's "I-Thou" relationship, Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" implies a kind of eros—a desire to know, a desire to enact dialogue with an other. "The genuine researcher," Gadamer reminds us, "is motivated by a desire for knowledge and nothing else" (*Philosophical* 10). I would say the same about the genuine student writer.

Genuine Writers

Genuine student writers often reveal more to us than our theories of writing and learning allow. Each of them—Christa, Jennifer, and Daniel—made out of the final writing assignment a hermeneutical occasion to *found* themselves in the world. They went deeply into language, while at the same time *projecting* themselves in the Heideggerian sense of the word. The writing was not therapeutic but foundational to their identities, a way of making sense of themselves as learners, thinkers, human beings. Each wonderfully illustrates that *desire* underpins learning. Recall Christa's remark: "my life seems like a blur with the exception of one thing. My quest for learning remains constant." And Jennifer: "I know my purpose [. . .]. [. . .] that's what I really needed to learn." And Daniel: "To come

to this idea [that revision also involves self-reformation] is pure bliss.” We can rush over these gems, even ignore them, but in doing so we miss much of the poetic force of students’ intellectual lives and the existential drama that characterizes their learning.

My experience tells me that students generally do not respond casually to assignments asking them to reflect on their learning; I find little inauthentic “idle chatter” apparent in these pieces. Learning in school provides a *starting point*, a way of *being in the world*. Students appraise their learning in relation to the life-world, seeing school as inextricably bound up with their identities, transforming themselves in the process of learning and reflecting. Their eloquence and passion move me. They remind me that, clearly more than a preparation for a career or one more hurdle on the way to imagined success, education—and, in particular, writing—has value for anyone coming to self-awareness.

If I were to follow a trend of composition theorists wishing to eliminate autobiography and personal writing in the writing class, I would miss out on the imagistic depth and resonance of student writing; what a tremendous loss this would be. Mike Rose, Victor Villanueva, Stephen Greenblatt, and Jane Tompkins all testify to the power of reflective, autobiographical writing in making sense of their struggles in the academic world. Reflection on learning—which is always autobiographical—clearly has a place in the writing class, for it allows students the chance to make crucial connections between the learning of academic subjects and their psychological lives. They in part create themselves in the universe of the written word.

I have been promoting here a *poetic basis of mind*, a mind that works imaginatively, metaphorically, poetically, associationally. Ego is not the primary concern here, but soul is.³ By psychologizing the writing class, I have become more sensitive to student struggles as writers, learners, and thinkers. The very process of writing this essay has made manifest an awareness of myself as a teacher who himself is involved in “soul-work.” As Parker Palmer notes, to become a more effective teacher requires the kind of self-reformation and self-knowledge that we usually ask of students. He suggests moving, life-changing teachers listen to, connect with, and engage students’ inner lives to fuse horizons. The classroom itself, he emphasizes, is a space where the “inner landscape” of both students and teachers emerge. “To educate,” he says, “is to guide students on an inner journey toward more truthful ways of seeing and being in the world” (6). By attending to the soul-making, poetic dimension of student writing and promoting their efforts to write about the complexities of learning writing, we can better guide our students in the inner journey that is education itself. ☺

³ See Nancy Welch’s *Getting Restless* for a sustained critique of “American ego psychology” and its pervading influence on composition studies.

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