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Talking The Poem: Prelude and Interlude to Conferencing and Revision

Gloria D. Nixon-John

When I write a poem, it is sacred territory for about twenty-four hours. When our students write poetry, even if forced to do so, their poems may be sacred territory for much longer than my twenty-four-hour grace period. Because of this, the revision process, with regard to poetry, requires a special sensitivity. Also, poetry writing and revision often require that teachers and students abandon some of the "rules" and procedures that they have learned to employ relative to prose, especially academic prose. For certain, the nature of the poem differs from other forms of writing. Its inception comes from some "other place" for me. Perhaps that is why I believe that poetry requires such delicate handling as well as a certain degree of abandon. I looked to some of my favorite poets and poetry critics for clarification and direction here. Marge Piercy suggests that "in order to get to a poem you must learn to push yourself, reach that cone of concentration . . . when all the voices in the head are one voice" (Piercy 7). M.L. Rosenthal says that the poem's characteristics arise "within a subjective world of reverie, memory, and tracteries of association" (Rosenthal xi). And William Stafford articulates the illusive nature of the poem's inception when he says, "My poems, especially, are not to my mind crafted objects, but little discoveries in language that spring from the encounters between outer events and that unpredictable - and never sufficiently identified mysterious river" (Stafford 3). Having experienced the process that leads to the poem's genesis, and having read ample notations by other more experienced poets that suggest that we cannot really define the process that results in poetry, I wonder why it is that so many of us still feel the urge to drag the would-be poet into revision as soon as the enlightened hand rises up and away from the page (or keyboard). Also, if we are in fact trying to discover the origins of poetry, I wonder why many of us spend so little time discussing the nature of the thoughts and actions that lead us to poetry? I also wonder how can we get our students to begin to see how to make the associations necessary for something beyond a first draft? I have begun to answer these

questions for myself and would like to share some of my discoveries.

First and foremost, I have learned that there is value in taking some time to talk about the genesis of the poem our students write. That is, I wish to suggest that for starters we allow the poets in our classrooms to discuss where the poem came from, the associations, the feelings the poet had when she wrote the poem, as well as what she thinks she wants yet to say. Of course you may want to limit this talk, but be liberal. By all means let the poet meander and babble on. For years I attended writing groups in which there was a rule against talking about the poem before reading it to a response group. I always felt this was not just stifling, but a bit too business-like. Poetry by nature is indulgent, a banquet; you are drawn to it so indulge and allow others to do so.

Actually, when I did individual conferences at my desk with students, I started with the kind of talk I am suggesting. I started with: Tell me where this poem came from if you can, or what do you think might have led you to these words on the page in the form of a poem? The talk that followed almost always generated ideas that took the poet somewhere the poet had not yet gone on paper. This approach also solved a problem that my colleagues have complained about for years, the problem of how to get the beginning poet even inches away from the initiating topic of the poem.¹ I am suggesting that we offer this talk before the poet thinks of the piece as finished, or even near to finished, and that this talk take place with a comfortable audience - the response group.

Let me try to illustrate by sharing a first draft of a one of my poems along with my talk about the poem. Here is my first draft:

Dear Stephen (w. t.)

I studied the e-mail message
just minutes after you sent it.
It was so fresh I considered

licking the screen.

You wrote:

"I like the poem but it needs to be pared
I'd omit lines 8, 9, 10 in fourth stanza
I'd delete the last line.

Just get to your more interesting list.

The pronoun in the last stanza is ambiguous,

try to make it clearer.

Any way, my friend for all its worth."

Last week our dinner guest just back
from a small village in China
told us about a delicacy he was served,
a lobster brought to the table alive
on a block of ice and sliced so fast
it was still moving when he took the first
bite.

When I try to connect the generous act
to the horror, or the horror to the generous
act,
all I can serve up are these flailing lines
attached to some hidden, fleshy core.
And it is shamefully
(and as rosy as if in the boiling pot)
that I ask you to take the knife in your hand
my hand over yours for precision,
my hand over yours to make it interesting,
clearer, for all it is worth.

Here is my talk (recorded and transcribed):

This poem came from a journal entry that I wrote after sending a different poem of mine to Stephen Dunning for his suggestions. I received an e-mail response about the poem I sent to him and his response prompted the poem I have just shared with you. It takes me courage to send Stephen my work because I really admire him and think of him as an important American poet. I am still a little intimidated by him—I guess I shouldn't be. I consider him a friend. But he was my first serious teacher/poet. Stephen never gives false flattery when it comes to writing. I trust his judgment and fear it as well. I get angry with that sometimes. I get embarrassed around him, too. Imagine that. Here I am middle aged and I still feel like a vulnerable student. I never feel I can reach his expectations. I remember feeling this way with Mrs. Roscup in fifth grade. She used to stop me and say, "Gloria, you are using the word 'well' too much. A well is a hole in the ground and has nothing to do with this discussion."

There is something that doesn't quite fit in this poem, or maybe it doesn't go far enough. I wonder how Stephen took the part about licking the screen. I felt good writing that, but now as I read back

over the poem it seems out of place, childish.

Also, this poem doesn't seem to be as rooted in images while many of my poems are. I wonder if that is good or bad. While I sometimes try to write in more of a narrative style, when I do the poems seems forced to me and fewer images surface.

I know that many teachers think it is better to have students reflect on their writing in writing, but I really suggest talk, because talk is less deliberate, more spontaneous. We tend to "slip" and meander and free associate more in talk, and when we do, we make discoveries.² I also suggest that you record the talk as I did, so that students can transcribe it and refer back to it.

What I do next is analyze my own talk about my poem. This is a bit like moving from the analyst's couch to the analyst's chair. Here is my brief analysis of my talk:

When I read over my transcribed talk, I see clearly that I have not adequately dealt with my feelings about Stephen. It is clear that he makes me feel insecure. I'd like to get to the root of this, perhaps in the poem. I also sense that I need to stretch myself a bit more, to reach some other meaning or understanding. For me that usually requires time and several drafts. Some other revelation or event has to occur before I can connect the poem to something beyond myself. Although this poem is more narrative than most of my poems, it lacks the images that make some of my other pieces strong.

Along with my own talk, the advice I get from others (in my case mostly language arts professionals or avid readers of poetry) is vital to my process of revision. I pick my peer response group carefully - more carefully for poetry than for prose. I do this because I think that many who do not read and write poetry, consider poetry something they cannot make sense of on their own—without a teacher or scholar's help. Reader-response theory is changing this to an extent, but for the most part even the most educated group I can muster will not get very far and are not very helpful unless they are somewhat intimate with this form. The implications for the classroom here are obvious. It helps if we give our students some solid peer response preparation. And once they have studied craft a bit as well, their comments are usually very astute, very helpful.

The group that I have worked with in order to revise my poem "Dear Stephen" consisted of three people. They were: Yates Hafner, an English Professor at Wayne State University; Renee Nixon, my daughter and a librarian at the Flint Public Library (Renee also writes poetry); Annie Balocating, a sophomore at Michigan State University, who was once a student of mine in a high school classroom

and who is currently taking college course work in poetry. I don't apologize for having close friends and acquaintances work in my peer response group. I actually think it helps to have some kind of friendship/relationship with respondents, providing they know something about poetry. I can separate what they say about the poem from their feelings about me because I know each cares about me. This allows me to take their advice seriously and also frees me up to take risks (in terms of what I have selected to share with them and the risks I am willing to take in revision).

For the sake of this article I have asked my response group to respond in writing. Here is Yates Hafner's delightful response to Draft 1 of my poem:

Re: Your Poem "Dear Stephen"

Dear Gloria,

First let me say emphatically that the third stanza is perfect. I mean in pace, clarity, economy of narration, effectiveness, everything. It's stunning. The matter-of-fact narrative style sets up the reader for a shock, which, in the next stanza, you rightly call "the horror." I don't think I can ever erase this image from memory.

Second, I do think the poem is well worth editing. So let me start with miniscule details—the sorts of things that distract me as an unredeemable picky, pedantic reader, even though they are all probably just typographical errors:

Stanza 2: Absolute fidelity to the punctuation in Stephen Dunn's e-mail seems unnecessary. I'd put a period after *pared*, another after *ambiguous*, and change *forth* to *fourth* and *its* to *it's*. (Or does "all its worth" refer to the value of the poem he is advising you about?)

Stanza 5: Although strict adherence to the rules of English usage would call for a comma at the end of line 3, there may be a subtle advantage in omitting the comma as you do, so that the line does not appear end-stopped like the next three. That gives this final part of the poem a slightly swifter—hence, more emotional—movement, a suggestion of some urgency or importunacy. But this comment is perhaps too subjective. I can make a case for doing it either way; a comma would be correct, but it's certainly readable without one.

Now to a few more substantive comments. In the first stanza I feel uneasy about ". . . so fresh / I wanted to lick the screen." You probably couldn't resist this touch. It does tie in with the trope of paring, slicing, and (by implication) eating and tasting, but the thought of licking the screen of a computer monitor, if not repulsive, seems wildly disproportionate to the unenthusiastic e-mail message on technical matters that follows. Evidently, Stephen **was** offering a few small pieces of advice—not to say it was unimportant—on a fairly long poem of yours. The last line

of his message has that worrisome ambiguous *its*. Is he saying, "Here's my advice for what it's worth, which is not much," or is he saying, "I offer these few suggestions for the sake of all the value (worthiness) I find in your poem"? Seems to me that with a minimum of effort he could have cleared up the ambiguity. That makes me think he was either in a hurry or had a fairly bland reaction to your poem; **interesting** in the fourth line of his message strikes me as a weasel word—it's noncommittal. That's why I don't think I'd be inclined to lick the screen (though once in awhile I've kissed a letter.)

Let's go to the last stanza. Why "shamefully"? I've got to think more about this word. Do your act of requesting his counsel and his critical perceptions make you feel a little ashamed? Aha! Maybe this goes along with "rosy as I in the boiling pot"—blushing, that is. Yes, I think that must be it.

I wonder about the unusual placement of the hands that you propose: "my hand over yours . . ." The problem to my literal mind is this: If I ask someone to teach me to slice something, I might ask him to put his hand over mine while I hold the knife. Or would the better way to learn be to put my hand on his? Or is it your idea that he barely touches the poem with his knife, showing you where to cut, but you apply the pressure, you make the actual incision, you being the final judge of his criticism and shaper of your own work? I'm not sure, but this last notion seems most plausible. It suggests simultaneous docility, collaboration, guided yet independent judgment, freedom, and responsibility.

What is about to be sliced is a living being, your poem. But you find your lines flailing helplessly like the appendages of the poor, struggling, tortured lobster. To cut them hurts all the way to "the hidden, fleshy core."

". . . clearer, for all it is worth." Yes, I think this wording is just right. No contraction here for it is. And actually, the *it* here is not ambiguous. It can refer only to the poem and picks up nicely the last line of Stephen's e-mail. So does your word *interesting* in the last stanza echo the same word in Stephen's e-mail. In fact, I like very much that last stanza of yours. And isn't there a delightful ambiguity in "to make it interesting"?—to make the poem interesting but also to make the uncertain process of where to cut, interesting. Mainly, though, in "to make it interesting, / clearer, for all it is worth" I feel a hidden energy; the phrase "for all it is worth" works like a kind of interjection, expressing earnest determination to indeed make this particular poem into the best poem it can be for the sake of its worth.

The ingenuity of your poem reminds me a little of Borges. It stimulates thought about the process of composing and revising a poem and about the function of criticism. In effect, you are asking those of us

to whom you sent your request of March 30th to offer advice about revising a poem whose subject is the revising of a poem not seen or heard, but mentioned. The possibility of an infinite regress comes to the fore—or the possibility that we other readers might be drawn into the poem and almost become part of it while remaining outside its borders (but that may be an over-ingenious extrapolation on my part).

At any rate, I find that the request to comment on your poem draws me more deeply and attentively into it. Now it's sort of like your hand over mine, guiding me to read with more care and responsibility. That's not a bad way to teach people how to read poetry: Ask them to comment on a work-in-progress. Yeah! Think I'll do that!

Well, these are my initial comments—for what they're worth. THANKS for the request!

Oh, one last word: It just struck me that the word **fondly** in your complimentary close often carries with it the meaning of **foolishly** when used by Shakespeare.

Fondly,
Yates

Equally delightful and insightful are Renee's comments. They follow here:

Dear Gloria,

Here are my comments on "Dear Stephen." I think any revision should focus on the first part of the poem. I think the last three stanzas are perfect and you should not change them.

Move the part about licking the screen closer to the center of the poem where the lobster is. Its implications get lost in the second stanza. Actually, I would like to see something besides "licking the screen" to express your taste for it. Maybe that is because I spend my days staring at a computer screen—because the thought of that electromagnetic dust too close to my face makes me want to sneeze, and because I know it is the message and the synchronicity (not the medium) that counts here. I understand why you want to connect the medium to the message, though. Also, you could lick the screen if you wanted to. If you want to, then why not do it?

Once you move the beginning, the poem will start at the second stanza. I don't know if you want to start it there or not. Maybe you will need to add a new beginning. It is not my poem, so not my place to say. Moving the first lines will definitely create an organizational problem in the poem, because you need to talk about the e-mail message before you get to the lobster. But I think that only the poet can decide how that could or should be redesigned.

Finally, you might consider setting the poem up like an e-mail, as a way to include the medium in your poem. Then you could say—

TO: sdunn@aol.com (Stephen Dunning)
FROM: G1oNJ@aol.com (Gloria Nixon-John)
CC:
RE: For all its worth

*Stephen Dunning wrote on April 18, 1999 at 11:46 am: . . .

*

*I like the poem but it needs to be pared

*I'd omit lines 8, 9, 10, in the fourth stanza . . .

*etc.

I studied the e-mail message just minutes
after you sent it, so fresh
I wanted to lick the screen

Last week our dinner guest just back
from a small village in China
told us about a delicacy he was served, . . .

Fondly,
Gloria :-)

The above is just an idea, but after I put it on the page, I sort of like how it simplifies things. It is very "e-mail ugly" on the page, though. What do you think? Maybe you could borrow some aspects of the e-mail format to reorganize your poem?

I hope my comments help you understand what I see works, and what I think is unclear. It was hard for me to begin this letter because I was afraid of taking the knife to the lobster, so to speak. But once I got started, it was so easy to tell you what "didn't work." Why is it so much more difficult to say what it is I like? Or what is effective?

Renee

Annie Balocating sent me the following e-mail message about my poem. It is obvious that Annie has a keen eye and ear for poetry. It is also clear that she is learning a great deal in her poetry class at Michigan State. Not to mention that Annie has always been able to read between the lines.

She says:

In the poem you talk about "licking the screen," and how the e-mail was so fresh. I am interested in the development of this image b/c it is so interesting and correlates to the lobster. The reason I felt the image was a bit bungled however was b/c you use hands as a motif at the end and "licking the screen" goes undeveloped.

Also, I am wondering if there is some sort of tension between the speaker of the poem and the subject Stephen. With the image of hand-holding, licking the screen, blushing, and in the last two lines of the third stanza "all I can serve up are these flailing

lines/attached to some hidden, fleshy core."
I hope this helps.
Love,

Annie

After the careful responses of my readers, it is clear that I must return to my poem. They have given me much to think about with regard to the typography, punctuation, as well some suggestions about the degree of poetic license I might take with Stephen's comments. The more substantive comments suggest that I go deeper, that I become even a little more introspective before I revise again. Also, Renee's last question opens a dialogue about the revision process that I am sure to have with her at a later date. Renee wonders why it was easier for her to find what didn't work as opposed to what she liked about the poem. I suspect (in a nutshell for now) that it is because most of her experiences as a student (in high school, undergraduate school, then graduate school) focused on criticism of surface features and some talk about what didn't work. Few people gave Renee permission to respond in a way she feels comfortable and from the knowledge she has as a writer. Doing what I am asking her to do is still the gray area between marking a paper with a red pen and good old-fashioned literary criticism.

One last time now I feel I should talk about all of my feelings at the point with regard to the poem. I know it will seem like voyeurism, or shoddy self-help to some, but it works for me (and for many of my students) so I am going to indulge myself once more:

Here is more talk (recorded and transcribed.) Think of it as therapy because that is how indulgent it feels. (There is no better way that I have found to get students to really focus on their work.)

Based on what all of my readers have said it is clear that "licking the screen" was not effective. Or was it? It did catch their attention. I don't really work with a computer as much as Renee does. It is more of a tool and an object in her workday. For me it is a tool that I use more often for my writing. I wonder if this "licking" was a somewhat sexual reference. I have always found Stephen attractive. But he has become this icon for me, like I would have to go through rock to get to him anyway. And Yates found the licking nearly repulsive.

When Yates suggested that Stephen's reaction was a bland reaction to my poem, he hit a cord. I wonder what it takes to get more than a bland reaction to my poems. Then, too, I haven't talked about Stephen's illness, an illness that causes his hand to shake on occasion. If I could touch the man that Stephen is, more than kissing him, I would want to hold that hand still, like I wanted to hold the poor lobster still. How this all connects is a mystery to me.

What about the typography Renee suggested? I like her idea, but don't know if I can pull it off. How do I clarify the motif as Annie suggested? I really want to throw the poem in a drawer and hide from it at this point, but I don't give up easily, especially when friends and students are watching.

I like to think of this second opportunity to talk about the poem as more than figuring out the genesis of and anxiety over the piece. Stafford says that writing a poem is easy, like swimming out of a fish trap (or perhaps a lobster trap!) He tells us that finding your way into a poem is just a matter of accommodating an emerging experience. Looking at the trap, the pattern is the rational work, the reconstruction that is hard (Stafford 42). My talk after Draft 1 and after peer responses is the way in which I begin to look at the pattern of the trap.

With all of the above in mind now, I attempt Draft 2:

Dear Stephen

1 It took me several minutes
2 to click on the . . e-mail message
3 you sent about my poem.
4 That you sent it so recently
5 made me want to touch the screen.
6 I considered your voice
7 the thick liquid of it tunneling
8 to the hand held receiver
9 then the plosives at the surface bursting.

10 You wrote:
11 "I like the poem but it needs to be pared.
12 I'd omit lines 8, 9, 10 in the fourth stanza.
13 I'd delete the last line.
14 Just get to your more interesting list.
15 The pronoun in the last stanza is ambiguous,
16 try to make it clearer.
17 Anyway, my friend for all its worth."

18 Last week our dinner guest just back
19 From a small village in China
20 told us about a delicacy he was served
21 a lobster brought to the table alive
22 on a block of ice and sliced so fast
23 it was still moving when he took the first bite.

24 I have since been trying to connect the generous act
25 to the horror and the horror to the generous act
26 but all I can serve up are these lines, flailing

27 attached to some hidden, fleshy core
 28 that I would slice if I could
 29 put my hand over yours
 30 for precision
 31 to steady the tremor
 32 to make it interesting even as you slice
 33 for all it is worth.

I have clearly decided to change the first stanza but it still remains awkward. Also, it didn't really convey my need to touch Stephen in draft 1. I believe the second draft does a better job of doing so. I also decided to explain why I positioned my hand over Stephen's hand for "the slicing." Along with those decisions, I removed the bit about being rosy and in the boiling pot because it sounded stilted to me, and I think Yates found it too deliberate, rooted in some other century.

I also did a few other things that just come with good revision. On line 6, I removed "on the phone" because the line was clear without this prepositional phrase. On line 27, I reversed the word flailing and lines. The adjective becomes the verb and is stronger as such. On line 30, I wanted the interest and slicing to occur more simultaneously and reversing these two ideas seems to help create this effect.

Of course several more drafts are in order. In them I might experiment with typography as Renee suggested. I might pull Miss Roscup into the mix somewhere, even deal with Stephen's illness directly and try to clarify the subject, motif, and my relationships to Stephen a bit more—all are possibilities that have surfaced as a result of my self talk and analysis, as well as the peer responses I received.

In conclusion, I think it is difficult to get ourselves and our students to move beyond that first draft with anything more than surface features unless we give them time and permission to consider the poem for what it is, revelation and elevation, as well as a bit of self help and exposé to some extent. I believe that talking helps before, during, and after the revision process. With talk we can often do that difficult work of questioning what we have just said in language that is our own, in language that because of its spontaneity is more attuned to the nature of poetry.

The things my response group told me also suggest that some discussion or perhaps an article is in order on the function of criticism (see Yate's comments) as well as more about why we find responding about the strengths of a draft so very difficult.

I hope that the struggle I have shared here translates into some ideas for classroom practice at least. Beyond this, I wish you the time to write and

the luxury to talk about that writing. As for my poem, I will move on to Draft 3 and then 4, perhaps remembering that Robert Frost said, "a poem is never finished just abandoned." But after all of this effort I doubt I can abandon it for long.

Notes

¹Richard Hugo discusses this problem in *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing*.

²There is a body of research on responding aloud that might enhance our discussion here and take us in another direction. See the work of Patrick Dias if you are interested.

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