1993

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Martha M. Vertreace

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Recommended Citation

Vertreace, Martha M. (1993) "The Use of Revision Journals in the Beginning Poetry Workshop," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 9: Iss. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1594>

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The Use of Revision Journals in the Beginning Poetry Workshop

Martha M. Vertreace

Theodore Roethke's often anthologized villanelle, "The Watching," repeats the intriguing line, "I learn by going where I have to go." For the beginning writer, no other lesson is more important, or more difficult. As a teacher of creative writing, I find that it is hard for my students to "learn by going." Instead they often seek "quick fix" answers, as if writing poetry were an exact science or simply a matter of applying some formula which students must try to coax out of me.

Writing is a journey with unclear beginnings and endings and that is something students find scary. More familiar with multiple choice or fill-in-the-blank work, they experience anxiety with open-ended assignments and are reluctant to challenge established assumptions about the nature of writing. Assigning a journal has been my way of circumventing those difficulties.

Aware of the students' desires for self expression in a nonthreatening context, I experimented with various types of journals after assuring the class that, unlike the procedure with their poems, I would be the only person to read the entries. At first, I let the students decide themselves what kind of entries they would make, requiring only a set number of pages for each class period. My goal was to have students develop conscious, internal control of the writing process, rather than relate to it primarily as automatic and completely external to their rational processes of learning. The lack of specificity of that assignment pleased some of the students, who saw the journal as their first experience in writing about very personal concerns. For them, this writing was often the only outlet for such discussion.

Journals were due once a month. I read them, commenting on the content and potential topics for further development. The students wrote a great amount about events and feelings important to them, but I saw little carry-over into their poetry no matter how many times I indicated that a given entry would be good material for development. The journals also exhibited little reflection about the writing process itself.

"Writing is a journey with unclear beginnings and endings and that is something students find scary."

It seemed to me that part of the problem was the students' lack of experience in the creative arts generally. Many seldom read anything unassigned and so, had little background in literature. Few practiced any other art form in a consistent, formal way. This meant there existed no common experience to bring to the journal so it could function usefully as a creative writing tool. The class was starting at ground zero in terms of writing poetry. One semester was hardly enough—for them or for me.

My suspicions about the value of creative experiences were strengthened substantially when I taught a class of students whose background was quite different. These students self-identified as artists, practicing in various media. Those primarily interested in becoming writers had a wide range of experience, from students who had written seriously for years to the beginner who

seemed more interested in the persona of being a writer. Other students practiced various arts—film making, fashion designing, painting, sculpting. Few of them had done writing outside the classroom setting, however, or read much literature. Neither group had read much contemporary poetry.

Yet these students had experience within the context of their chosen art form, so there existed a common foundation for discussing issues of creativity. Whether we talked of images, details, or symbolism, students were able to relate to the ideas within the context of the form with which they were familiar. Consequently, the lack of having read widely in poetry was temporarily compensated for by reference to artistic media which they knew.

Rather than encourage students to keep a free form journal, as I had in the first class, I explained that the journals would be consistent with the kind of revision journals many poets keep. Such a journal would achieve two goals:

1. It would provide a context for doing revisions. Many of my students felt revisions were unnecessary and went against the idea of "inspiration." To them, revisions seemed more like punishment for work badly done rather than an essential part of the writing process.

2. It would make the process of revision conscious. Students would have to explain the reasons why they made choices. Working out such explanations would encourage the use of higher order thinking.

I limited the journal to a reflection on one poem previously assigned, due at midterm. This kind of journal was as much an experiment for me as it was for the students. I did not want to lock myself into something which simply might not work. I wanted the freedom to change it substantially without causing a lot of anxiety.

If all writing was autobiographical, as Donald Hall suggests, then proper use of the journal could provide access to a wealth of material. By making the process more subject to conscious control, students would grow beyond being limited to their individual biographies, seeing them as possibilities for the art form rather than as its limiting parameter. The need to tell the "truth" about an event or person could be subsumed within the artistic demand that subject matter be secondary to artistic considerations, such as conciseness, or emphasis.

I feel it is important for writing teachers to share their writing, so I brought in two of my own poems for the class during the semester. Many college texts now publish draft versions of their

model writings as well, so examples of writing in the developmental stages are not hard to find.

My poems illustrated two revision models. The drafts of "Time Is a River Without Banks" contained only the scratch outs, questions which I raised about several stanzas, and other marginal notes. My changes were presented without explanation. The drafts of a poem called "Muse" included extensive commentary in paragraph form about the process of writing the poem, the reason I made the changes, the effect I was after, etc. Students were given a choice, as to which kind of revision approach they would take in their journals.

"Many of my students felt revisions were unnecessary and went against the idea of 'inspiration.'"

I have chosen selections from the journals of two students, Christopher Morford and Jay Ramella. Both examples are early revisions. These students chose the first "Time Is A River" format for their journal, making changes without necessarily explaining their reasoning in writing.

Chris carried around a bound notebook in which he recorded his thoughts. It was an organic, free-flowing journal which he began prior to the class. The pages copied here are a draft of "Coda." He bolded portions with which he is uncomfortable, indicating the problem he is working on, the question he is asking, or the area he is exploring (figure A).

Because Chris is both an experienced poet and journal keeper, there is an ease which flows through his entries. He allows himself the freedom to speculate. The ending of the poem presented difficulties for him. In drafts not reproduced here he asks, "Stop here?" and later, "more sense of resolution? Still not sure."

While Chris used the traditional pencil and paper scratch-outs for initial drafts, Jay Ramella's poem "Careful, the Gods Might Hear You," whirled from his thoughts into his computer. This was Jay's first attempt at creating this kind of journal. He approached it with some skepticism but afterwards found it a helpful tool. In his original drafts, he highlighted his commentary with yellow markers. Using the computer gave Jay quicker access to changes, and he could view his results right away (figure B).

Revision journals guide the student into doing writing which emanates from personal goals

and is not limited to the need to earn college credit. They allow students to develop a product which comes as much from their experience and values as it does from new techniques, and they provide a foundation for further explorations. Learning becomes more authentic than it would be were the students simply reproducing knowledge which the instructor deemed important.

Teachers of writing workshops occupy a position which allows them access to students' most personal feelings. Because students tend to use this material as subject matter for poems, they are often unable to commit to the drafting pro-

cess, as if to change something calls into question the truth of what the student experienced. The revision journal, however it is constructed, helps the student to gain distance from the subject in order to objectify the writing project. The personal focus of the journal also allows for levels of participation based on a student's own experience, rather than in comparison with other writers in the class. Whether students come to class with an extensive background in the creative arts or are just beginning to explore their interests, revision journals can provide useful guidance and visible records of their growth as writers.

Figure A

Chris Morford #1

A fever creeps into my room ~~_____~~ (Sounds harsh & awkward)

A ~~blockade~~ of commitments and priorities

block my door ("Block" repeated too closely)

I curse beneath the traffic

Someone's going somewhere (Sounds too simple

That someone isn't me too obvious)

Mere sounds

As the vulture flies

to the main runway

At **O'Hare International Airport** (sticks out, too long)

The **planes** rattle my windows (need stronger word, could

and shake the china refer to single engine planes

They send their rumble too small to shake things)

through the floor

Up my chair, Into my bones

And when they pass

the sound lingers

In the body of a Spanish guitar

Leaning in the corner ~~_____~~ ("slouched" would

Smudged by the fingerprints of a stranger work better, a

Loosened plaster settles on its shoulders sense of drudgery, boredom)

(Sounds **An Ivory** tuning key rattles

Awkward, In need of a string (Loses sense of rhythm

doesn't flow) **broken long ago** remove)

? Sounds corny

five still remain ~~_____~~ Awkward

Discordant and lifeless

Stretched loosely across

A yawning hole

We travelled together ~~_____~~ *attaching too much personality*
In the flight paths above ~~_____~~ *to an inanimate object*
With new strings
and new threads ~~_____~~ *sounds outdated*
And new songs to write ~~_____~~ *? corny*

I could look down upon
the silver linings of clouds ~~_____~~ *cliche' justified?*
soar high above storms ~~_____~~ *don't need both*
Eye To Eye with the sun
But now I retire
to fluorescent bulbs
and hang my jacket **upon** ~~_____~~ *too formal?*
the Spanish guitar

Until bright strips of morning ~~_____~~ *awkward transition, like the*
Leak through my blinds ~~_____~~ *passage, make it work*
A grand staff of light
Burns on the wall ~~_____~~ *too bright, too "grand"*
presenting each day ~~_____~~ *Sounds like a sermon*
As an unfinished song ~~_____~~ *Obviusly summing things up*

FIGURE B

Jay Ramella
March 9, 1993
Poetry Workshop

First Revision

Careful, The Gods Might Hear You

Got rid of quotation marks

I took this Object
(what one might call my heart)
and I threw it into the sky.
A prudent sacrifice.
The Gods mused why?

Take my heart, this thing
that I have absolutely no use for.

*I got rid of "retorted,"
since I'm stating this line
and the reader knows that.*

The Gods said regret this moment until your dying day.

I changed "till" to until

Years later,
one unaccompanied evening
I met a beautiful stranger.
Hair the color of chestnut. Eyes like mahogany.
I felt a union, a passion so great.
Something was astir this exalted night.

So I kneeled and I asked the Gods
what could this feeling possibly be?

*Got rid of "looked upwards, because it's
assumed you look up when you
talk to the Gods anyway*

And the Gods laughed.
 It's something that you will never be able to understand.
 It is an emotion *This is all abstract*
 that is both innocent and ardent. *so I will get*
 It is a confidence *rid of it for*
 that most mortals can only try to grasp. *the second revision*
 It was to be love.

Thus I began to cry. *Changed weep to cry, it sounded archaic*
 for suddenly,
 after many years *Changed "after all of these years" to "many"*
 I could now feel the cold, grating emptiness within me.
 I collapsed upon the earth
 Right hand
 clutching the left side of my chest,
 and I remembered:

That once, long age, *In this stanza I was dying and speaking*
 I had taken that entity *or perhaps I had died already, so I*
 (what one might have called a heart) *made it a thought instead of a death*
 and I had thrown it *scene*

up into the sky.

Second Revision

Jay Ramella
 March 9, 1993
 Poetry Workshop

Careful, the Gods Might Hear You

I took this object
 (what one might call my heart)
 and threw it way up into the sky.
 A prudent sacrifice.
 The Gods mused why?

Take my heart, this thing
 that I have absolutely no use for.

The Gods said regret this moment until your dying day.

Years later,
 one unaccompanied evening
 I met a beautiful stranger.
 Hair the color of chestnut. Eyes like mahogany.
 I felt a union, a passion so great.
 Something was astir this exalted night.

*I will
 Get rid of "hair
 the color of...
 It sounds too much
 like a fairy tale*

So I kneeled and asked the Gods
what could this feeling possibly be?
And the Gods laughed: It was to be love.

*I got rid of the abstract
emotion in this stanza*

Thus I began to cry.
For suddenly,
after many years
I could now feel the cold, grating emptiness within me.
I collapsed upon the earth
Right hand
clutching the left side of my chest,
and I remembered:

That once, long ago
I had taken that entity
(what one might have called a heart)
and I had thrown it

up into the sky.

*changed "way into the sky" to
"up into the sky" since it was
considered to be archaic*