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Making a place for poetry: Response in an adult writing group

Andrea Luna

University of New Hampshire, Durham

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Making a place for poetry: Response in an adult writing group

Abstract
This dissertation examines how writers respond to other writer’s work in the context of a community poetry group. A qualitative study of the poetry group, including participant-observation and tape recording of group meetings, analysis of conversation during meetings, collection of documents, and open-ended interviewing of participants, was undertaken over a period of ten months. Through narrative analysis of the data, one of the primary units of which is the single poem plus the group's response to that poem, the author attempted to create a credible interpretation of the activities and conversations of the group which addresses the question of what constitutes good response in the context of this particular group.

The study found that, despite the explicitly stated purpose of providing suggestions about “what may need work” in a poem, poets in this group generally did not use response to revise their poems. The group's real work was in the discussion of the poem, a collaboration to create a space in which the poet's authority to say what his poem means is protected at the same time as the group is claiming the authority to write new versions of the poem. Several things complicate and shape the act of response, including tacit ideas about proper or helpful response, the struggle over the authority to assign meaning to the text, and the necessity of maintaining harmony. But the act of response is important because it is part of the work of the poet, because it teaches group members how to be poets, and because it creates a communal space for poetry to exist in, not as text, but as work.

The complicated picture of response which emerges is examined, and implications for the way we look at what it means for a writing group to be successful, the way that we structure writing groups in classrooms, and the way that we look at literacy, as something that is practiced not something that is learned, are explored.

Keywords
Education, Adult and Continuing, Education, Language and Literature, Education, Sociology of

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MAKING A PLACE FOR POETRY: RESPONSE IN AN ADULT WRITING GROUP

BY

ANDREA LUNA
BS, University of Vermont, 1982
MA, University of New Hampshire, 1988

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Reading and Writing Instruction

September, 1995
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8/18/95
Date
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ABSTRACT

MAKING A PLACE FOR POETRY:
RESPONSE IN AN ADULT WRITING GROUP

by

Andrea Luna
University of New Hampshire, September, 1995

This dissertation examines how writers respond to other writer's work in the context of a community poetry group. A qualitative study of the poetry group, including participant-observation and tape recording of group meetings, analysis of conversation during meetings, collection of documents, and open-ended interviewing of participants, was undertaken over a period of ten months. Through narrative analysis of the data, one of the primary units of which is the single poem plus the group's response to that poem, the author attempted to create a credible interpretation of the activities and conversations of the group which addresses the question of what constitutes good response in the context of this particular group.

The study found that, despite the explicitly stated purpose of providing suggestions about "what may need work" in a poem, poets in this group generally did not use response to revise their poems. The group's real work was in the discussion of the poem, a collaboration to create a space in which the poet's authority to say what his poem means is protected at the same time as the group is claiming the authority to write new versions of the poem. Several things complicate and shape the act of response, including tacit ideas about proper or helpful response, the struggle over the authority to assign meaning to the text, and the necessity of maintaining harmony. But the act of response is important because it is
part of the work of the poet, because it teaches group members how to be poets, and because it creates a communal space for poetry to exist in, not as text, but as work.

The complicated picture of response which emerges is examined, and implications for the way we look at what it means for a writing group to be successful, the way that we structure writing groups in classrooms, and the way that we look at literacy, as something that is practiced not something that is learned, are explored.
INTRODUCTION

THE WORK OF RESPONSE

Unicorn Rider

I am aware of each hair on his back,
horse hair, the same spikes that line the hair shirt,
white, wet, defined, and in front of me only the spiked horn, the hard bone twisting out of a skull,
angry orange eyes, and the capacity for mythical speed.

Vision a deep tunnel lined in lead,
I don’t dare look away;
My feet are slippery on his sweaty arched back
as I balance up here precarious, my net tutu constricting my hips,
arms straight out and shoulders tense,
half moons of sweat etched in sequins and salt.

Beyond that the audience deep into a dark growl
of fairy tale expectations.

— Andrea Luna

My freshman college students told me this poem is about sex. It is, they said, about the difference between our expectations about sex and our first experience with it. Unicorn riders are, as everyone knows, virgins, but the rider in this poem, focusing so intently on what has turned out to be a less than pleasant experience, is discovering that losing her virginity is not the stuff that fairy tales are made of. Instead it’s tense and sweaty:

arms straight out and shoulders tense,
half moons of sweat etched in sequins and salt.

It’s a balancing act:

My feet are slippery on his sweaty arched back
as I balance up here precarious...

And maybe it’s frightening and dangerous:

...and in front of me only the spiked horn, the hard bone twisting out of a skull, angry orange eyes, and the capacity for mythical speed.

The rider, my students pointed out, is so intent on the experience, having to pay such close attention to what she is doing, that the experience is turned into something entirely different than a fairy tale encounter.

I am aware of each hair on his back...

I don’t dare look away;

Besides, my students pointed out, look at the symbolism: the hard bone, the deep tunnel – it’s got to be about sex. I had to admit that the reading they had constructed made sense. I can no longer read the poem without remembering how my students hesitantly referred to their own first experiences with sex and, in between giggles, grimaced at the memories.

But when I wrote the poem, it was about other kinds of fairy-tale expectations, and how often dirty gritty reality intrudes upon those expectations so that the event feels nothing like our fantasies of it. The “event” I had in mind was something closer to the literal unicorn ride in the poem: an actual staged event, from the point of view of the performer. I had never ridden a circus horse bareback – particularly not a unicorn, of course – but I had been in front of many an audience, in a previous life as a professional juggler. I knew how different the experience of juggling was from what the audience expects to see – the smooth, graceful juggling pattern, clubs wafting out of one smiling juggler’s hands and into the air,
then magically coming to rest in the hands of another juggler. The actual experience is different – hard physical work, messy readjustments, and constant counting. There is nothing restful about catching a juggling club; it smacks into your hand hard, and if you don’t catch it just right, it will raise a blister, break a nail, leave a red welt behind.

I’d also done a lot of of other theater, beginning when I was thirteen. Playing one of my first roles, a fairy tale queen, I lifted my hand for the prince to help me up after I was knocked down by an errant dragon. I could feel it shaking from nervousness. It took forever for that prince to get over to my side of the stage and help me up, and I was sure everyone could see that hand shaking. I was ruining our big dramatic opening, undermining my graceful pose, and spoiling the illusion created for the audience. That’s what I thought the poem was about: the difference between the illusion and the experience of the performer creating the illusion.

It was accidental that I asked my students to read this particular poem. I had recently been to a staff meeting for the University of New Hampshire freshman composition program, where one of the other instructors went over an exercise to help students with close reading. She suggested putting a short poem on the board before the students arrived, covering it with a sheet of newsprint, and then, during class, uncovering it one line at a time, pausing after each line for discussion. I was intrigued at how closely the staff members at the meeting read each line of the poem she used as an example, how rich the poem became as we all put our heads together and paid close attention. I decided to try the exercise in my own class. The next morning, I flipped through several anthologies, searching for a poem to use, but I couldn’t find one in the five minutes I had between cereal and the bus. So I grabbed a folder of my own recent work and chose a
poem, somewhat arbitrarily, because it was short, and because I was fairly

certain it was complex enough to prompt interesting discussion.

If I had known that Unicorn Rider was so clearly about sex, I might
not have chosen it for my Freshman English class. But as soon as they
pointed it out, I knew they were right; this poem might very well be about
that specific performance. The meaning of my poems often seems to unfold
only after I hear other people's response to them. Or perhaps I should say
multiple meanings unfold; the poem becomes richer when I allow myself to
be open to other people's interactions with it. I expect surprises in my
writing. It's not unusual for me to change my own mind about what a
poem is about after I share it with trusted readers, with my students, with
the audience at a poetry reading, or with the various poetry groups and
workshops I have participated in. In fact, receiving readers' responses is
my primary method of revision – other readers allow me to re-see my poem,
and seeing it anew helps me decide whether to change it or leave it as it is.

As a teacher of writing, I have always had a great deal of faith in my
students' ability to read one another's work, or my own work, in
meaningful ways and in my own ability to help shape their response into
something useful to the writer as she revises. I use my own experiences as
a poet who depends on the response of others when I teach composition; on
my very first day in a classroom, I asked the students to get into small
groups of four or five and respond to one another's writing. It has always
seemed that if I could use other writers’ response when I revise my poetry,
my students, although they are writing prose, should be able to do the
same. That faith grows out of my own experience as a writer; the best work
I have done has been facilitated by other poets responding to my work, both
in university creative writing workshops and in community groups.
But I have also wondered exactly what it is about sharing my work with other poets, and hearing their response, that helps me write. Why is it that sometimes just reading a poem out loud to an audience and watching their faces is enough to help me re-see my own poem? When do I want a reader to tell me how they see the meaning of the poem? Why would I be willing to let my first-year students tell me what my own poem is about? Are there times I am not willing to let others convince me of new meanings for my own work? Why is it that sometimes another writer's revision advice seems just right, and other times it seems like an intrusion? How do I read responses to my work? What it is that constitutes good response?

If I hope to teach my students how to respond to one another's work, and if I hope this will teach them something about their own writing, then it is particularly important to answer that last question: what is it that constitutes good response? Peer response groups and writing workshops, more and more popular in classrooms of all kinds in the last three decades, are predicated on the assumption that writers gathering in groups and responding to one another's work will help one another become better writers. Is that true? And if it is, why? What is the best way to form these groups, to build the respect and trust necessary for student writers to listen to one another's response?

Anne Ruggles Gere, in her comprehensive monograph, *Writing Groups; History, Theory, and Implications*, claims that "Writing groups, both within and beyond academic institutions, exist as vehicles for learning, for helping individuals improve their writing" (55). Gere traces the history of writing groups, both in and out of the classroom, from the social clubs and literary societies of the eighteenth century, through more recent instances of "writers responding to one another's work"(1) –
including helping circles, response groups, teacherless writing classes, peer review, peer tutoring, round tables, and collaborative writing – and claims that the recent “institutionalization of writing groups makes theoretical examinations of writing groups “timely.” She outlines influences on the development and practice of writing groups, including theories of collaborative learning and language development. Gere’s answer to the question of whether writing groups help individuals become better writers is imbedded in her claim that “All writing group theory radiates from the fact that these groups assume a social definition of writing” (55). A social definition of writing depends on the idea that language develops in the individual in response to interactions with the other. Gere explains that “...when language is perceived as a social construct central to knowing – as Vygotsky claims – then writing groups become essential: essential because learning to write means learning to use the language of a given community, and writing groups provide a forum in which individuals can practice and internalize this language” (96). In the same way that conversation is necessary for a child’s language development, then, the give and take of response is necessary for the developing writer.

There are ways other than writing groups for a writer to receive response to her writing. The writing teacher, in particular, will obviously play an important role for writing students; discussions with a teacher can allow the writer to “practice and internalize” the language of writing, as well as ways of talking about writing. In fact, Chris Anson’s collection devoted to response contains only two essays, of sixteen, which focus on response from peers instead of from teachers. The role of the teacher as respondent, however, has been problematized in much recent work,
including several of the essays in that same volume; Anson claims that “true response suffered” as a result of a mechanization of teacher response due in part to a move away from one-on-one tutorials in the late 1800s. “Discussion, negotiation, language in real use – these became ready-made evaluations churned out twenty or thirty at a time” (3). Since then, according to Anson, the field has been searching for some kind of key, an evaluative procedure which will provide consistent response across contexts, but that key is non-existent, and not just because of the paper load. The multiple and sometimes conflicting roles teachers play (Elbow; Danis; Murray, What Can You Say...; Purves), the power issues in a classroom (Probst), as well as the teacher’s own preconceptions about what a text might be (Brannon and Knoblauch), all stand in the way of “real” response from writing teachers. This is part of the reason that writing groups and other types of peer response are increasingly advocated as the appropriate way to involve student writers of all ages in meaningful, intersubjective conversations about their work.

This dissertation will consider what it is that writers do when they respond to one another’s work. That is the question that ties together my curiosity about how writer’s groups have worked in my own life as a writer and the concerns I have about using writing workshops in classrooms. I have gone back to a trusted group of my own respondents for the answers, poets who regularly respond to one another’s work. Looking very carefully at poets responding to other poets in this one group setting, I will address questions about “response”: What are we up to when we respond to one another’s poems? What do we hope to accomplish, and what complicates our hopes? What does it mean for a reader to “respond” to a writer or to his text? What do writers do with response? How do groups of readers respond
together? What kinds of issues and tensions do writers and readers, discussing a text, have to negotiate? What implicit definitions of response do we bring into the workshop, and how do those definitions affect the conversation of the group? What I hope this dissertation does, by recognizing and exploring these questions, is complicate the idea of response in writing groups.

**Learning to Respond**

The year I started college, I took myself very seriously as a writer – of prose – so when I had to choose a “Freshman Studies in Writing” seminar, a required course which might be located in any department, I chose the one based in the English department. It was a ten credit course, two semesters long, with only twelve freshmen enrolled, designed, like all of the courses at Sarah Lawrence College, to be an intensive experience involving a great deal of independent study. The section I registered for happened to be taught by a working poet, and he made it into a creative writing workshop: we discussed poems we had read, and poems we had written. This was my introduction to poetry; I had never been exposed to free verse, or even poetry written by people who were still alive, and I was fascinated. I remember, especially, the joy of exploring *Diving into the Wreck*, by Adrienne Rich, listening to our instructor point out the wealth of the language, and realizing that I could see the things in the poem that he was pointing out. I suspect that I learned as much about poetry from the instructor’s obvious joy at discovering some new nuance in a poem, particularly when it was one of my own poems, as I learned from the
formal analysis itself. And he read our poems, at least apparently, the same way that he read the poems of famous authors, with the same excitement at connecting two images, or reading a relationship between content and form, the same delight. It was that, more than anything else, which convinced me I might be able to write a poem.

The answer to the question, “What does it mean to respond to a poem?” will be imbedded in whatever situation the question is being asked. I learned to respond to poems by taking this creative writing course, not by analyzing poems in literature classes. But the course, like many creative writing workshops at the undergraduate and graduate level during the sixties and seventies, was strongly influenced by current trends in literary criticism at the time, particularly New Criticism, and these influences shaped what it meant to respond to a poem. We were taught that the true meaning of a poem could be found through an objective analysis of the text; whatever meaning the author intended was irrelevant (the intentional fallacy), and the idiosyncratic reactions of individual readers were also irrelevant (the affective fallacy). What mattered was not what was trying to be expressed, nor what the poem made a reader feel, but what could be found in the formal analysis of the text. We didn’t look at Diving into the Wreck, for example, as a document written by a feminist, or as exemplifying some epiphany in Rich’s personal life, nor did we look at the poem as an opportunity to explore our own lives or feelings. Instead, we focused on the text itself, assuming that the meaning of the poem lay there.

In addition to responding to the poems of Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, and other “real poets,” we were also responding to one another’s work. We wrote a poem a week, with xeroxes for everyone, reading the poems out loud in class and then listening to our classmates’ analysis of
our text. In our class, as in many creative writing workshops, student readers were encouraged to respond with analysis, not affective response, to ignore the poet's intentions, the historical occasion of the poem, and their own autobiographical connections with the poem. In order to help the readers focus on the text instead of the author's intentions for the poem, those intentions were left out of the discussion. This was accomplished by literally denying the writer her voice for the duration of the discussion: we were told not to talk.

The experience of analyzing poems as objects separate from the author introduced me to a question which seems to be pivotal any time a group of readers responds to a text: where does the meaning of the text lie? Formal analysis can teach a young poet a lot about poems, as well as create an interesting habit of distance from the material, allowing the poet to practice making space for alternate interpretations of his work, and to begin to develop a sense of audience. Art becomes universal, and the poem would become art, only if the writer is willing to acknowledge others' rights to her texts (Dewey) – others here being first the students in the workshop and the professor, and then editors and other readers. But as a very young and inexperienced writer, the exclusion of my intentions made me uncomfortable. I was trying to make meaning through my writing – I had things to say – and it seemed that, at times, I was being denied the authority to to say those things.

In the context of New Criticism, response means objective analysis of a text; I suspect it also means, essentially, what my students call “ripping a poem apart,” and I'm not sure this is the best way to help young writers learn to become better poets. I turned into an excellent critic in that class, but I don't think I learned to respond to the poets themselves. Perhaps it
makes sense to say that response is meant to help the writer become a better writer and provide motivation for him to write again, later, as well as to help him revise the text in question, whereas critique is designed to judge the poem's worth. The kind of critiquing I learned in that workshop, inherited more from the history of literary criticism than from writing pedagogy.

More recent schools of thought in literary criticism, particularly reader response theories, have espoused different answers to the question of where the meaning of a poem lies, and these different answers have led to different ideas about response. Reader response theories acknowledge the importance of a reader's interpretation of a poem, and the multiplicity of meaning; the meaning of a poem is created in the interaction of the text and the reader (Rosenblatt), or granted authority by an "interpretive community" made up of readers who share certain assumptions about what poetry is (Fish). What a poem means depends on who owns the authority to say what it means at any given moment; when a group of readers responds to a poem, the group is, however temporarily, claiming that authority. Reader response theories sanction that claim, but they have been less influential in postsecondary writing workshops, which still tend toward formal analysis.

I continued to learn about responding to poems, as well as to poets, after I left college and founded a community writing group. Writing poetry was still a hobby – I didn't call myself a poet until I went back to graduate school several years later – but I found myself missing a live audience. In the four years I shared poetry with that non-academic group, I discovered that sometimes a reader's gut-level response could show me as much about my poem as a formal analysis. I also found that the group itself and its
continued existence became more important to me than their response to my poems. Like the high school writing group in Ludlum's 1992 ethnographic study of talk, the group of children described by Geraldine Edwards, ages nine through thirteen, who established their own literary magazine, and the adult reading groups in Michael Smith's study, we used our discussions of poetry to create and strengthen the social relationships between group members.

After I finished my Masters in poetry, and had been teaching composition for several years, I joined another community poetry group, the group which is the focus of this study. Again, I continued to learn, about poetry and about responding to poems. This group, made up of members of the university community, is filled with both talented poets and talented writing teachers, and has more in common with the other community group I belonged to than it does with any of the creative writing workshops I have taken in academic settings. But there are many differences, as well, including more structured procedures for meetings and a larger percentage of participants who first learned to respond to poems, like I did, in creative writing classrooms.

Most studies of writing groups which have been done have examined teacher-directed peer-response groups in classrooms. One example of a classroom study is Sarah Freedman's 1987 study of response groups in ninth grade classroom which focuses on how two ninth grade teachers used response groups, what kinds of response the students gave, and how those responses corresponded to the teacher's purpose in setting up the group. She concluded that students enthusiastically discussed the content of one another's work, but were reluctant to evaluate, and never played the
role of teacher. She also found that students resisted the tasks as framed by the teacher, particularly on dittoed response sheets.

Francine Danis focuses on the writer’s role in the group, in six peer-response groups in a college writing workshop. She identifies four main types of verbal activity: asking questions of group members, proposing their own suggestions for revision, agreeing (or not) with their peers’ suggestions, and explaining their intentions for their work. Writers didn’t know whether to defend themselves or sit quietly. They also had trouble “distancing themselves from their writing.” She recommends explicit directions from the teacher. In her dissertation, looking at the same groups, Danis examined the types of suggestions that the student readers made. She concludes that the students had “clearly internalized the criteria that composition teachers typically use in responding to student papers,” and can apply these criteria in an “accurate manner.” She seems to be using, like Freedman, a pedagogical model of on-task/off task behavior, with the teacher defining the task, as a model of success.

There are two assumptions underlying these studies which seem inappropriate for the study of a non-classroom writing group. One, writing groups in classrooms have been assumed to be individually educative; that is, the point of having student writers gather together in groups was to help the individual students learn to be better writers, producing better versions of the texts they are working on, as well as learning to internalize their teacher’s voices so that they will be better writers in the future. This assumption may lead researchers to overlook the question of whether or not student writers are internalizing the voices of their peers, as well, and whether relationships between students are helping, or impeding, the student’s ability to give and receive useful response. Secondly, and
similarly, many studies of classroom writing groups have tended to assume, implicitly or explicitly, that success can be defined in terms of the tasks which the teacher has assigned the group. But the group in this study, which is what Anne Ruggles Gere refers to as an “autonomous” writing group, has no teacher to define the purpose of the group, or to measure its success. In fact, it has been necessary to ask what is the purpose of the group? And instead of asking whether response is successful, this study asks how do the participants of this group define success?

**Reading the Group**

Underlying this dissertation is the notion that human beings are constantly engaging in acts of interpretation. As readers of one another’s poems, the members of a writing group act as interpreters on several levels. They interpret the text and render a “reading” of the poem, which they may try to articulate, or which they may use to arrive at suggestions or frame comments which they share with the group. They must also interpret the responses to their own poems which they receive from the group. And they must interpret the social situation in which they are giving and receiving response, “reading” the relationships and interactions in the group.

This third kind of interpretation underlies, and possibly shapes, the other two. Because we are reading the poem in the context of this particular group, our interpretations, on all these levels, are guided by the tacit traditions of the group (Polyani), as well as by the assumptions about poetry
and response each member brings into a meeting. Our group has elements in common with (as well as history involved with) both expressive writing workshops and graduate creative writing workshops and inherits complicated assumptions about response from both. Individuals in the group have been variously influenced by expressivist and writing process pedagogy; by the several different traditions of critical theory popular in the last few decades, particularly New Criticism and reader-response theories, and by various pedagogical interpretations of those theories. We bring partial scripts from our individual histories into the new community created by the poetry group, and use those scripts as they seem appropriate. We seem to switch back and forth between discourses, taking a very practical approach, mixing and matching theories, and abandoning one set of terminology for another if it seems expedient, according to our interpretation of the poem, the responses to the poem that are being put forward, and the conversation and social situation at the moment we are talking.

To uncover some of the traditions, implicit rules, ideas, and ideologies which are shaping the writing group's conversation, and our response to one another, I have examined the language that we use when we talk as a group, and when we talk about what it is we are doing. I recorded the conversation when we met to respond to one another's poetry, and conducted open-ended interviews with individual participants, as well as continuing to participate in the group's activities, observing and taking field notes, and collecting documents and other data. As a researcher, I am also engaged in yet another interpretation. Clifford Geertz identifies the interpretation of a culture as a kind of translation, and then defines
“translation” in terms very similar to the acts of interpretation engaged in by the poetry group itself:

Translation, here, is not a simple re-casting of other’s ways of putting things in terms of our own ways of putting them (that is the kind in which things get lost), but displaying the logic of their ways of putting them in the location of ours; a conception which again brings it rather closer to what a critic does to illumine a poem than what an astronomer does to account for a start (10, my emphasis).

My goal has been to apply what Eisner has called the “enlightened eye” of the qualitative researcher and to construct a credible interpretation, or translation, of some of the activities and conversations of one poetry group, an interpretation that will illuminate our ideas of what it means for writers to respond to one another.

The first four chapters of this dissertation constitute the portrait I have tried to paint. In Chapter One, “Conversations of the Group,” I set the scene, introducing the group and the community, and describing what kinds of poems we share, how we go about sharing them, and what types of responses we give one another. We are a community of skilled respondents with diverse techniques, working through structured procedures, and this chapter is my introduction to the particulars of that context. I also hope, in the first chapter, to accustom my reader to thinking in terms of one of the primary units of my analysis: the single poem plus the group’s response to that poem.

In Chapter Two, I focus in on one poet who prefers a group who will “nurture” his poems, and who will frame their suggestions for revision in interpretations of the poem. He does not believe that there are objective rules or criteria we can use to evaluate poems, but he nonetheless will sometimes objectify a poem so that he can use it to think with. The Western dichotomy
of “head” and “heart” complicates our ideas about how we should read and respond to poetry; the kinds of response this poet hopes for, and the reasons that he sometimes does and sometimes does not receive those kinds of response illuminate how those complications shape the activities of the group.

Chapter Three describes another participant, an experienced writer but a new poet. This poet feels tensions around the question of what “serious” poetry is, and what it means to take oneself seriously. He is also very aware of the roles he plays to keep the group functioning smoothly. We all play different roles during our meetings, and Goffman's notion of the “situational definition” illuminates how we collaborate to create a performance during which the poet's authority to say what his poem means is protected at the same time as the group is claiming the authority to “write” a new version of the poem. The poet described in this chapter defines “revision” as re-thinking; this definition adds an important dimension to the assumption that a group can, by giving response, help a poet to rewrite a text; that assumption, however, often competes, in the group, with the idea that a poem is based in the poet's experience.

Chapter Four describes the use to which individual poets put the responses of the group; surprisingly, the poets in the group generally do not use the suggestions of the group to revise their poems. In the same way that the poet’s work is in the writing of the poem, not in the text which is the residue of that writing (Bell), the group’s work is in the discussion of the poem, not in the suggestions for revision which are the residue of that discussion. Although there are several things which complicate and shape the act of response, including the ideas we bring in about what’s proper or helpful response, the struggle over the authority to assign meaning to the
text, and the necessity of maintaining harmony, that act of response is important to the poets in this group because it is part of the work of the poet, because it teaches us how to be poets, and because it creates a communal space for poetry to exist in, not as text, but as work. The creation of that communal space requires, according the poets in this group, a great deal of respect and trust.

This four-chapter portrait might be described as two case studies of individuals embedded in a case study of a group, but just as the individuals who appear to be contained “in” the group actually constitute the group, and are shaped by it, I’m thinking of the middle two chapters as not just case studies of individuals, but as integral parts of the case study of the group, not just “in” the portrait, but comprising the portrait. Therefore, although two chapters focus on individual poets, those two chapters also continue to render the group and its conversations.

Because this study describes a teacher-less writing group, operating within the sphere of influence of the university but independently, I have left the discussion of implications it might have for writing groups in classrooms, and for the teaching of writing, for the fifth chapter, “Revising Response.” In that chapter, the complicated picture of response which emerges from the portrait of the group is examined, and implications for the way we look at what it means for a writing group to be successful, the way that we structure writing groups in classrooms, and the way that we look at literacy, as something that is practiced not something that is learned, are explored.

The last chapter, “Seeing and Re-Seeing,” considers the methodological assumptions behind this qualitative study and examines the implications of the portrait painted in the first part. This study was
done by a writer writing about a group of writers writing new versions of one another's texts, and this chapter explores some of the difficulties and the implications of that multiply recursive interpretive act, exposes my methods of collection and analysis, and discusses writing as a form of inquiry.
CHAPTER ONE

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT POETRY

The thirteenth of May was a relief after a long and snowy New Hampshire winter; it was sunny all day, and the sunshine lasted right up until seven o'clock, when our poetry meeting was scheduled to start. We were convening at Don Murray's house, and as I pulled across the street and parked under his little pear tree, Don came out of his garage and down his driveway to tell me I'd better turn the car around.

"They're ticketing everybody who parks facing the wrong way, even the people who live here."

I hastily got back in the car and went to look for some place to turn around. Down the road, through the pleasant residential neighborhood and past a small stone chapel, I realized the "block" was too long to just go around, so I turned around in someone's driveway and headed back to Don's, now facing the right way to park on his side of the street, and still the first to arrive.

Don was waiting for me, standing hands on hips at the bottom of his driveway.

"Nice out," he said.

I said yes. Across the street, Tom Newkirk was in his yard, preparing to barbecue dinner. Don waved at him and joked about his status as cook for the evening. Durham, New Hampshire, isn't a very large town; I've gotten used to meeting people I know from the university wherever I go, grocery store, coffee shops, or bookstores. I waved, too, before Don and I
slipped past the new car in his garage and into the cool of his library, a room piled high with books that seems to be perpetually in a state of being rearranged, and then on into the living room.

As we went in, I asked Don if he knew who was coming to tonight’s meeting. The membership of our group is fairly constant, with members making a commitment to come as often as they can, but we never know from meeting to meeting who will show up. At each meeting, we decide who will host the next time, and the host sends out reminders, along with a set of directions. Don has assumed the responsibility of keeping the mailing list up-to-date, and makes sure to distribute new copies when there are changes. That makes meeting reminders easy to do, because each host has a copy of the mailing list at hand. The notices have even become kind of fun. The reminder for tonight’s meeting read:

*Tens-Hutt!!!*
The Grenadier Poets will attack
39 Mill Pond Road
at oh-nineteen-hundred [7 PM]
Thursday
13 May 1993
armed with poems of steel
poems of wit
poems of celebration.

Don’s own self-deprecating sense of humor is obvious here (he would never command us to do anything!) and in most of his other meeting announcements. He is also expert at inventing new names for our nameless group:

*S.L.O.P*
[Social League of Poets]
will meet...on Don Murray’s back porch

*The Society of Great Poets will meet ...*
*The Association of Great Unrecognized Poets...*
*The meeting of Great Poets of Western Civilization, New*
Hampshire Branch...
The Famous Poets Reassurance Corporation [FPRC]...

Other people's reminders are just as idiosyncratic:

The next meeting of the "I'd-like-to-recommend-deleting-the-
last-stanza/line/word-of-that-poem Society" will be held in the
central New Hampshire hamlet of Dunbarton [at Jim's
house]...

In Virginia I learned that Friday was POETS day – Piss On
Everything, Tomorrow's Saturday. We'll discuss that reading
and others on Thursday, July 22, at Brock's...

Still others are more to the point with their reminders: "Please
Come!" scribbled in the corner of a map with an address.

As I stood in Don's living room waiting for our current meeting to
start, he told me he didn't know who would be coming tonight, but he had
put out all the chairs available, because you never know. The room did
seem full of places to sit; in addition to the comfortable sofa and the
recliner, there was a deep rocking chair and several dining room chairs
recruited to fill the spaces in between. I looked around for a place to plug in
my tape recorder, and had just decided to claim that rocking chair when
Brock arrived.

"How are you?" Don asked, settling into his recliner.

Brock, who teaches at the university, said he'd been grading
portfolios, from his English 519, *Introduction to Critical Analysis*, course,
all day long.

"I've been doing it like 401, so I have two hundred of them. Two and a
half days straight and about that much to go."

English 401 is Freshman English at the University of New
Hampshire, a course all three of us have taught, and which Don, as many
readers will recognize, was influential in shaping. Of the fifteen people in
our poetry group, about a third have taught in the Freshman English program at UNH at one time or another, and most have taught writing in other situations, including in elementary and secondary schools, as well as universities; the group includes an elementary teacher, a literature professor, a linguistics instructor, and a well-known writing consultant. Six of us have earned Masters degrees in writing, three in fiction, one in non-fiction, and two in poetry, and one other is currently working on a Masters in poetry writing. Several of us have studied with poets teaching at UNH, including Charles Simic and Mekeel McBride, who was the original founder of our group though she is no longer a member. Our poetry group, although not affiliated with the university in any formal way, is situated firmly in the academic community and in the traditions of writing pedagogy and scholarship for which the university is known.

Drew, Hildred, and Jim all arrived at the same time this evening, answering our question about who might show up. We had, then, two women in attendance and four men; our membership list includes eight women and six men. Jim went into the kitchen to talk with Don’s wife Minnie Mae. Drew told us about his new job, at a food bank, a big operation in Connecticut. He had been looking for something in that area for some time, and his family had already moved down there to their new house, so this was very good news, and we all congratulated him.

“One of the things I’ll miss is this group,” Drew said. Although several people drive as much as an hour to attend meetings, Drew will be too far away to commute. We’ll miss Drew, as well. Jim describes him as “a valuable element” of our group, and told me later that Drew has “a sensitive, gentle wit and insight, and has a way of making suggestions and observations that are nicely non-threatening and seem to be well thought
out. And,” Jim reminded me, “that’s a real art.” Drew may have polished this art of gentle response in his previous job as an editor for the university publications office; we are lucky to have had him practice it with us.

We began to pass out the copies of poems we had each brought; it’s understood that all participants in the group bring a poem to each meeting, with enough copies for everybody.

“Well, this is an interesting juxtaposition,” Drew said, commenting on the titles of his poem, Poetry, and Hildred’s, which is called Forgetting How to Read. Hildred’s title is interesting in another way, as well, when juxtaposed against her recent work: the last four poems she has shared with the group have been about parts of speech. A linguistics instructor at the university, she has been writing a series of poems which explore intersections between the functions and structure of language and the everyday details of life. Brock laughed and pointed out her switch in direction:

“First you know all about language, and now you’ve forgotten how to read.”

How We Respond to A Poem

After we were through passing out the poems, Don said, “Well, it’s seven. I guess....”

We almost always start on time, between seven and seven fifteen. This is the most structured writing group I’ve ever belonged to outside of a classroom; generally, we start on time, we end on time, and we proceed in an orderly fashion around the room, listening to and then responding to
each person's poem. There's very little chat in between, perhaps a joke or
two that provides a transition. And there isn't even much talk about
anything other than poems at the beginning or ending of the meetings,
although many of us work together, send our kids to the same day care, or
have long-standing friendships — it is, after all, a small town — and we do
check in with one another. But we get together on the second and fourth
Thursday to work on poems, and work is what we do, for the most part.

"Let's see," I say, mostly to myself, "I'm at Don's house, so...." I
started to rearrange the poems in my hand.

Don, picking up on his cue, said, "So I have to go first." The host
always goes first, a tradition which allows us to avoid an awkward wait for
a volunteer. He looked at the poem in his hand. "This is not a poem about
combat," he said, pointing out a change of direction from his own recent
poems, and read the poem to us.*

* Love Measured By Distance

He stood at the edge of rain,
she at the edge of sun,
laughing.

At night they slept apart
after touching.

She told her friends how good he was
at silence, never made her thoughts
his, never finished her
sentence, never looked
away.

* All poems are reprinted here exactly as they were originally handed out at
poetry meetings, including the authors' names. Many of the poems, of
course, have been revised by the authors since the meetings.
He told how he always heard her step
before it touched the stair, was still
surprised at how her laugh
tweaked the tail of his story
toward new meaning.

She knew his nearness
before she felt his shadow
lay across her shoulder.

He felt the air compress
before their distance
closed.

One night,
waiting in bed,
watching her brush her hair,
he caught her smile in the mirror
as she caught
his.

— Donald M. Murray

I loved this poem as soon as I heard it; it left me somewhat speechless. I tried to signal my joy with a big smile in Don’s direction, but he wasn’t looking; he was too busy trying to cope with the feelings most of us have during that pause in the conversation between the poet’s reading and the beginning of the group’s discussion. I quickly wrote, at the top of my copy which I would give him later, “It’s lovely, Don!” I’m the only one who consistently takes notes on the poems and our discussion; I got into the habit while participating in another poetry group before coming to Durham.

Our responses to poems often start with “I like....” The first comment on Don’s poem was about the form of the poem: Brock said, “I like the line breaks in the third stanza.”

She told her friends how good he was
at silence, never made her thoughts
his, never finished her
sentence, never looked away.

I added, "I think the line breaks work great to kind of set up the line breaks in the last stanza, too, which I really like. Although they're more...um...conventional? But the last, short little line of the poem is set up by the line breaks in the third stanza. It works really nicely." The line breaks between what's his and what's hers, in both stanzas, emphasize the separation between them.

One night,
waiting in bed,
watching her brush her hair,
he caught her smile in the mirror
as she caught his.

After Brock and I explained what we liked, or what "worked" for us about the form of the poem, Hildred pointed to a particular line she liked.

"I really love that line always heard her step before it touched the stair, particularly after never finished her sentence..."

I didn't understand what she meant; did she see some kind of connection between the structure of the third stanza, with its separation of the he and she in the poem, and the separation between the step and its touch in the fourth stanza?

...never finished her sentence, never looked away.

He told how he always heard her step before it touched the stair, ...

So I asked, "Is [what] you like the fact that the third stanza keeps them separate? He never makes what's hers ....[pause]... his. Therefore they're
"It's like they're separate, but always aware of where the other body is. It's like planets in orbit."

Building on what we knew we liked about the poem, Hildred and I worked towards ways to paraphrase its meaning. I liked my idea: the lovers, always aware of one another, yet never in one another's way, defined a universe, a system of bodies, created by distance and, paradoxically the same thing, closeness: love measured by distance, as in the title of the poem. Hildred may have seen something different in the poem; where I was finding paradox, she may have been finding tension: although he never finished her sentence, he nonetheless always heard her step before it touched the stair, which might be the finishing of a kind of physical sentence, finishing her step by hearing it even before it touched down. Hildred, our linguist, may have seen a tension there, or perhaps even a contradiction. I'm not surprised I described my own interpretation the way I did, either: I have a long-standing love of science fiction! We each bring our prior knowledge and our personal experiences to the experience of interacting with a poem, and that means we each read it differently.

Brock built on our paraphrases, which both focus on the distance between the lovers, and explained the concern he'd had while hearing the poem: "In my cynicism, I guess I was wondering if what seemed to be a good thing, all this distance, was going to sour, and turn into, in fact, a problem. I'm glad it didn't."

Don had a specific question about this draft. "Minnie Mae thinks..."
began, and then started over. “I have two questions about the end. She thinks the last stanza should be cut. And I have real questions at least about the second and third lines of that stanza.” The last stanza reads:

    One night,
    waiting in bed,
    watching her brush her hair,
    he caught her smile in the mirror
    as she caught
    his.

“It seems like a more ordinary experience than the rest of the poem,”
Brock said, tentatively, and Drew nodded.

“Minnie Mae, I think, felt that the poem closed with closed,” Don explained, referring to the last line of the previous stanza:

    He felt the air compress
    before their distance
    closed.

“Yeah,” said Drew. “I was going to say that. But the whole thing is so nice and tender, I sort of, I just don’t want to cut anything out of it. I guess I’m in a real mushy mood tonight.”

“Sad to see it happen,” Brock said, deadpan, and everyone laughed.

“I like the rhythm of all this, too,” Drew added, “so cutting anything out makes it feel kind of hurried. I think it’s too fast and too short.”

“You might think about keeping the last three lines of that last stanza. Make it more of a recurring act,” Brock suggested. Without the first two lines, the stanza would read:

    he caught her smile in the mirror
    as she caught
    his.

“It’s as though that’s part of their relationship, that’s what they do.
Rather than what just happened one night.”

I liked Brock’s solution to the problem of the last stanza, but later in the discussion, Drew brought up his concern with the pace of the ending again, combining Brock’s solution with a suggestion of his own.

“I wonder,” he said, “about building on Brock’s suggestion: take those last three lines of the poem, and somehow make them part of the [previous stanza]... I just hate to rush out of this poem.” I mentioned that we might also put the hair- brushing mirror glance prior to the air compressing.

Then the distance closing would still be the end of the poem.

He caught her smile in the mirror
as she caught
his. He felt the air compress
before their distance
closed.

As we discussed Don’s poem, Love Measured By Distance, we responded to the poem, and to its author’s concerns, in several different ways. We tried to address a specific concern that Don had about the last stanza, reacting to that part of the poem and suggesting solutions to the perceived problem. We expressed a great deal of admiration for the poem, telling Don we loved the title, that we liked the way the form of the poem intersected with its possible meanings, and simply, as Drew said at the end of our discussion, “It’s a really lovely poem.” We each brought our personal experiences and knowledge to the discussion – knowledge about sentences, about solar systems, about love – trying to make connections and use those connections to understand the poem. And, through these kinds of responses, as well as by paraphrasing what we saw as the important ideas, and pointing to the form and content in the poem which leads us to think those ideas were important, we worked to articulate meaning for the poem.
That last may be our most important task, each time we respond to a poem; we don't always agree with one another about what a poem means, and sometimes the poet doesn't agree with the group, but we try to let the poet know what the poem says to each of us.

**How We Search for Meaning in a Poem**

Don claimed *Love Measured By Distance* wasn't autobiographical, laughingly telling us that “none of these are things I've achieved yet!” But it is a truly personal poem, like most of his work, growing out of his careful and caring observation of the details of everyday life. Although I hesitate to define a “type” of poetry written by all the members of our group, our poetry is often very personal, and despite Don's disclaimer, mostly autobiographical. Hildred's poem this evening is based on an incident when she was seventeen.

**Forgetting How to Read**

*After the car accident,*  
*there was no turning the page.*  
*A black page hung.*  
*Shapes moving through their colors*  
*had been wrenched out,*  
*as if the non-human scream*  
*of an alarm clock*  
*had taken their being.*  
*No cars, no trees*  
*shouldered their way*  
*through the blackness.*

*Just as quickly*  
*as the demand of the first clock,*  
*too many things filled the page.*  
*Shouting, colors elbowed each other.*  
*Trees crowded their way into the picture,*  
*stabbing their branches in all directions*
like the veins of an eye.
Smaller pages appeared
and across them lines.
Bits of black branch carved so perfectly,
with such determination
that only human beings could have done this,
or a life so close.
They were traveling east
in a caravan.

I knew these carvings
would never jump
or stray from the line,
but would hold their place like the horizon.
Marching, marching
with such determination.
If only I could have stopped them,
they would have told me so much.

— Hildred Crill

"Can you explain or a life so close?" Brock asked Hildred. Sometimes we feel we have to turn directly to the author of a poem and ask specific questions to fit terms or ideas we don't understand into the meaning we are making, or even, on occasion, to begin to make any sense of the poem.

Bits of black branch carved so perfectly,
with such determination
that only human beings could have done this,
or a life so close.

Hildred was happy to explain, as she felt tenuous about that particular line: "Yeah, I had a little trouble with that. Because this is an actual experience I had, when I was seventeen, and I've always wanted to describe it, because it's very weird to not know how to read. Very strange." We could all imagine that it would be strange, to forget how to read after you had learned to take it for granted. I remembered a friend of a close friend telling me what it was like to recover from a head injury, knowing that things you used to know you just had no access to.
"And that was this impression that I had," Hildred continued. "That somehow perhaps Martians had done this. That I knew it was a system, and I knew some life form had done it. I mean, this is quite seriously what I was thinking." That explained *a life so close*: Martians could be close to human, but not quite. Hildred admitted, though, that Martians might be a little distracting in the poem, even if that had been what she’d been thinking while she was writing.

"I could read it without that line in it," Don said.

*B*its of *black branch* carved so *perfectly,*  
*with such determination*  
*that only human beings could have done this.*  
*They were traveling east*  
in a *caravan.*

"Well, I guess I just wanted to somehow get that across, because that just seemed so odd," Hildred answered. "It was so odd that somehow it was intelligence behind it. It was like an odd thing to have occurred to me."

Although Don can imagine a version of the poem that makes sense without the impression of not-quite-human, and therefore alien, control, Hildred didn’t seem to want to let go of her actual experience. Brock, sympathetic, suggested *life form,* or *intelligence,* phrases that help us understand that experience better than the original *life so close.*

"Or some such intelligence," I added.

The differences between the poem as it appears to us on the page, and the events the poet was trying to describe, a part of her own history, often lead us to suggest this kind of compromise, but our misunderstandings can also give the poet an entirely new perspective on the poem. Drew told Hildred that because he didn’t know about her "personal experience" after the accident described, it hadn’t occurred to him that the woman in the
poem had literally forgotten how to read. But, he told her, "...I understood this was the experience of anyone being in something like this. Being totally jarred out of the usual way of making sense."

"There's a progression, a movement through the poem, from things not making sense, being wrenched out, losing your being, objective reality, towards things returning to order, but the order, the meaning, being so horrifying that you still don't want to be able to read it."

"Does that make any sense?" he asked.

Hildred exclaimed, "Yes, it does!"

Drew's misunderstanding of the poem, because he didn't know Hildred's specific misadventure, and, subsequently, connections Brock and Don made to their own experience and knowledge, helped Hildred to see possibilities in her poem that she hadn't seen before, ways that it becomes universal by speaking to others.

"I connected it to something I read somewhere," Brock contributed, "where people who are blind from birth, get their optic nerves fixed or whatever. Suddenly they can see, and then are really sort of let down, because what they had imagined was better, or at least different somehow, from what was there, and they wanted to go back to it."

"There's also that business of people with aphasia, and other conditions like aphasia," Don added, "where they can't handle all the information that's coming in. Going to the supermarket would just be a nightmare."

We bring our poems to the group to ask what they might mean to our trusted readers; with a complex poem like Hildred’s Forgetting How to Read, our readers have to work hard to tell us. In our discussion of Hildred's poem, the personal connections we made helped us, as
individuals and, when we tried to articulate them, as a group, deepen the understanding of a poem that we were constructing as we talked. When the group is working to articulate the meanings of a poem, personal connections and subjective responses are not treated at irrelevancies, but as a valid part of the group's attempt to make sense of the poem. We also question the poem, as well as the poet, poking at the places it isn't making sense to us. We look for patterns, as Drew did when he told Hildred that "there was a progression, a movement" through her poem. Sometimes the conversation which results from these different ways of searching for meaning in the poem confirm the poet's intentions. Sometimes they enrich the meaning of the poem for the poet. And sometimes the poet is surprised, because the respondents find meaning the poet didn't know was there; the March evening we met at Don's house, for example, the group's response to my poem helped me to decide what I wanted the poem to say.

How the Meaning of a Poem Can Change

I wasn't very happy with my poem. I had been captivated, during a wandering drive down the nearby seacoast, by the bright, artificial colors of a lighthouse and its bright green lawn, set against the duller gray-greens and browns of the shore, and I had written several drafts earlier in the day. Although I was pleased with the colors in the poem, I wasn't sure what it was really about. I hadn't even decided, when I reached the meeting, what I was going to call the poem, and I told the group as much, and then read it, with two possible titles.

The Lighthouse Poem; or
Drowning Again

Lighthouse on the dangerous rock,
slung out into the ocean,
perches like a ludicrous hat,
red and white striped, on the gray
and threatening brow of land.

Dandelions claim the newly green swath
of lawn, on all sides surrounded
by the roar of the ocean. Piteous cries
of cormorant and gull sound against the wind.

The breeze collects us,
blows us over to the edge,
and we rest a moment on the granite
brow of the shore, remembering
what it isn’t like

to be at home, to be out of the wind
to be far enough away that fear
doesn’t count, to never be drowning again.

Even the buoy, fluorescent orange, is odd
next to the floating islands of dank weed.

— Andrea Luna

I thought Don was going to start the same way we did with his poem, pointing out the things he liked, when he said, “I like this very much.” But he followed that immediately with, “I’ve got a couple of little picky things.” He was obviously planning on pointing out small changes he’d make in the poem. Don’s a fast reader (he told me so during an interview, too — practice, he says, makes for a fast reader), and the rest of us sometimes have a hard time keeping up with him.

“I don’t think that perches like is necessary. Slung out into the ocean, /a ludicrous hat.”

Drew hummed a thoughtful agreement. I waited to see what else Don would pick out.
"And piteous doesn't do it for me; I don't need it," he said. "Cries of cormorant and gulls sound against the wind is enough."

Often, when I bring early drafts of poems to the group, I am not sure what I think they are about, and I am looking for someone to tell me. I'm also more comfortable if the group tries to arrive at some kind of agreement about what is happening in a poem, and what its message might be, before giving me advice about changing it. Deciding what the poem is about is part of what we understand our task to be, as one reader implied when she said, about one of Drew's poems, "I'm not sure I understand it, but I like it. I don't know if that's legitimate, though; I feel like I have to understand it before I like it."

I could see Don's point; the words he deleted made the poem sound a little pretentious. But I was waiting for someone to tell me what they liked about the poem, or what it meant to them, so that I could use their perspectives to clarify my own thinking about the poem. Happily, after he had taken care of piteous and perches like, Don obliged.

"I like this remembering what it isn't like," he said. "Really there's something eternal in that."

\begin{verbatim}
and we rest a moment on the granite
brow of the shore, remembering
what it isn't like
\end{verbatim}

I didn't say anything. Actually, \textit{what it isn't like} is one of the lines I was least happy with. It seemed typical to me, not because I have seen it in too many poems, but because I had seen it in too many of my own poems. Defining things by their negatives, what they are not like, or by the space around them, is either an important personal issue I am trying to sort through with my poems, or an overly easy move I've gotten into the habit of
using when I can’t articulate what it is like. I’ve been trying to decide whether it’s a profound concern with the function of poetry in naming the world with language, or a not-so-profound inability to do so. I saw the same problem sneak into this poem while I was writing it, but I hadn’t wanted to look too closely at it yet. Pointing out that line, Don had focused my attention there again, and everyone else’s; from around the room, there were nods and mutters of appreciation.

Then Don made another suggestion, and this one surprised me, because one thing I thought maybe this poem was about was the contrasts created by the color in the landscape.

“And I don’t need the last stanza,” he said.

Even the buoy, fluorescent orange, is odd
next to the floating islands of dank weed.

“Never to be drowning again is where the poem ends for me.” Again, heads nodded. I silently re-read the end of the poem, and I was surprised to hear that it sounded like an ending to me, as well.

and we rest a moment on the granite
brow of the shore, remembering
what it isn’t like

to be at home, to be out of the wind
to be far enough away that fear
doesn’t count, to never be drowning again.

I wasn’t sure what kind of an ending it was. To never be drowning again seems so safe and secure. But the poem claims a double negative: remembering what it isn’t like ... to never be drowning again. That teasing with mortality, braving the sea winds and imagined storms, is appropriate for standing at the edge of the seacoast cliffs next to a lighthouse built for braving storms. Maybe it was just another night for cutting the last stanza
off of everything.

"And it's very appropriate somehow for a lighthouse poem. It has something to do with the intermittent light that comes from the lighthouse. Is it is, or is it ain't?" Drew said.

"Oh! Yes!" I exclaimed. Now I saw why never to be drowning again is the end of the poem. It was the juxtaposition of artificial, bright, man-made colors against the darker, more ominous colors of the ocean that triggered it for me, but the poem, written on a brilliantly sunny day, is about the part of us that throws our imagination out into the storm, the fog, the dangerous ocean, even on a sunny day, and dares to think about drowning. It's at once brave and foolish. We need to remember the possibility of drowning, and then, at the same time, taunt it with our bright, hopeful colors. I could see how flashes of courage might be compared to the flashes of a lighthouse, a comparison Drew found in my poem.

I was more open to the smaller suggestions now that I had decided that I did want to cut the last stanza and end the poem with to never be drowning again. It's not that I disagreed with Don's earlier suggestions; it's just that, without knowing what the group thought the poem was trying to express, it was hard for me to pay those suggestions much mind. This desire to hear an interpretation before any suggestions for change is something I share with several other people in the group, some of whom are insistent about it.

Once the larger issues were taken care of, several people suggested other small changes. "You've got two brows," Drew said, pointing out an awkward repetition I hadn't noticed. "Two brows is too many."

Lighthouse ...
perches like a ludicrous hat,
read and white striped, on the gray
and threatening brow of land.
...
and we rest a moment on the granite brow of the shore, remembering what it isn’t like

“Cut the second brow,” Hildred suggested, in response. “We rest a moment on the granite of the shore.”

“Yes,” I said, “I don’t like that brow as much as the first one.”

“You don't even have to find another word.”

“Which one?” Jim asked, glancing at his draft, ready to mark the change.

“That second brow. Cut it so it says the granite of the shore,” I answered, officially sanctioning the change on the draft.

“Or it could be the granite edge of the shore,” Don suggested.

“Then there’s too many edges,” Drew pointed out.

The breeze collects us, blows us over to the edge, and we rest a moment on the granite edge of the shore, ...

“Oh, excuse me, I'm sorry,” Don said, laughing. “It’s the edge police over here. He takes off his brow hat and immediately puts on the other one.”

Quietly, Brock added, “She can go home and claim she’s brow-beaten.”

Brock can never resist that kind of humor, as the poem he shares with us later demonstrates. Called Grub Lust, it contains wonderful examples of word play:

The grubs senseless lurk –
the white of fatless milk
of pregnant dogfish bellies
of smegma, raw mucous, jism.
Their mandibles and tentacles
grope without sight or feeling.
Of what offal are they full?
I would never have written a line like Of what offal are they full? Drew suggested Brock change it to Of what offal are they full of? ; he would never have written the line, either, but we've all come to expect it and appreciate it from Brock! We try to keep up with him in conversation, too; another attempt at humor happened a little later in the discussion of my poem, after Jim said the image of the lighthouse had reminded him of Dr. Seuss's *Cat in the Hat*.

“Oh, yeah, the big red and white striped hat, kind of leaning over?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he answered. “I'm not sure that that's a problem. I think it was something about how you called it a *ludicrous hat*. And then you gave me the colors. I immediately saw that hat in the *Cat in the Hat*.”

“Your daughter's influence?” Hildred asked.

“No,” he answered, teasing her. “I'm just learning how to read again.”

What with the Brow Police and the Cat in the Hat, it seemed the group was through discussing my poem in any serious way. I thanked them for their suggestions so we could move on to the next poem; the poet whose poem is being read generally takes responsibility for signalling the end of the discussion, and we usually do that with a “thank you” for the attention our poem has received. And, in this case, I was grateful for the group's response to my poem, because their interpretation had given me a new understanding of the poem. I try to put my own intentions for a poem down for a little while when I listen to the group respond to my poem. What I intended the poem to mean when I wrote it is, for the moment, not as important as what the poem says to this group of readers. But I am only able to do this because I know that my readers firmly believe that whatever
they say, I do have the last word. I will be the one to take the text away, evaluate and re-evaluate, and revise. To this group of respondents, the poet's intent is important and can't be put aside; whatever letting go I can do is only temporary.

**What We're Up To**

This poetry group was formed several years before I joined it. When I was invited in, the group was going through a transition; membership had declined a bit, and several of us were invited to join the group to fill out the rolls. I discovered as I went to more meetings that it was quite unusual for the group to spend time at meetings talking about procedures; actually, it was unusual that the group talked about much besides the poems themselves. But that first time I participated, perhaps because of the transition the group was going through, Don suggested that we talk about different or new ways the group might work. One poet said we might mail the poems to one another in advance. Others proposed that we read a poem twice out loud, instead of once, or that someone other than the poet read the poem. No one, however, made any comment on the types of response we give; the new ideas were procedural, rather than substantive. Later, after I had been attending meetings for some time and the group was, again, going through some transitions in membership, Don brought a rather tongue-in-cheek document called *Poetry Group Traditions* to one of the meetings, which articulated some of the procedures of the group:

**Poetry Group Traditions**

*Since there are so many new members of the poetry*
group and since I am the oldest living North American poet, someone suggested I write out our traditions, which are, of course, subject to change and evolve from practice.

- We meet on the second and fourth Thursdays of each month.
- We meet at the home of a member who invites us.
- That person notifies members who are not present of the date and location of the next meeting.
- Everyone brings enough copies of his or her poem for the group.
- Meetings start at 7 and end at 9.
- The host[ess] reads first and the reading proceeds to the left.
- The person whose poem is being discussed ends the discussion with a "thank you." This person has the responsibility to monitor the time, usually about fifteen minutes each, depending on the size of the group. If people have not read their poetry at 9 PM, they read first the next time but we try to have everyone present receive a response in the two hours.
- The response is supportive, emphasizing what the reader heard in the poem, what works, and what may need work.
- New members are chosen by informal discussion with fellow members. At the moment, we have a full membership.

We pretty much follow all these rules to the letter, although the one about spending about fifteen minutes on each poem had been broken a few times in the previous couple of meetings, which may have been what prompted Don to write the “traditions” down. And most of the rules are fairly straightforward. But embedded in this mostly procedural document is one rule which is actually a description of what kind of response we hope to give to one another. Don’s written description of our response is succinct: “The response is supportive, emphasizing what the reader heard in the poem, what works, and what may need work.” But in some ways, it raises more questions than it answers. What does it mean to be supportive? Are
we trying to be supportive of the writer's original intentions for his poem, or supportive of his efforts to revise? Or are we trying to show our support for the poem itself? How do we show support? How do we go about telling the writer what we heard in the poem, and what do we do when what we heard doesn't match what she meant to say? What does it mean to say that something works in a poem? What if what we say works is working toward a different meaning than the poet intended?

During our meeting at Don's house in May, the several different kinds of response we gave one another can be seen as the concrete answers to some of these questions. We try to be supportive by telling the poet what we like, sometimes specific lines, sometimes whole sections, formal issues, or images and ideas. For example, Brock started off the discussion of Don's Love Measured By Distance by telling him that he liked the line breaks in the third stanza, and Hildred told Don she loved the lines always heard her step/ before it touched the stair in the same poem. We answer the poet's specific questions about the draft, if the poet asks any, as when Don brought up Minnie Mae's question about the last stanza of that poem, and asked if he should cut it, and Drew and Brock worked at it until they found a compromise. And we hope that our positive responses to the poem, and our suggestions for solving problems the poet has identified, leave the poet feeling supported.

We tell the reader what we heard when we paraphrase what we think the poem means, often working together until it seems we have the meaning right, as when the group talked through my lighthouse poem until Drew came up with his succinct insight about the intermittent flashes of light being integral to the poem's meaning. We provide perspective by reading the poem through the filter of our own experiences, which may be
different than those of the poet, the way that we read Hildred's poem with our prior knowledge of aphasia, head injuries, and blindness, even though none of us had shared her experience of forgetting how to read. We ask the poet to explain parts of the poem we don't understand, as when Brock asked Hildred about her line *a life so close*, in that same poem; by doing so, we let the poet understand where the poem was not clear, where we didn't hear it at all. And we hope that by working to articulate what the poem means to us as readers, we are letting the poet know what we heard from his poem.

What is particularly telling in Don's description of our responses is his emphasis on the word *may*, when he says our response emphasizes what *may need work* in the poem; that one little, three letter word, bold and underlined in the original, points to the care we take to protect the ownership rights of the poet while still allowing that we see changes that might improve the poem. We do make suggestions for changes, as when the group decided I should cut the entire last stanza of my lighthouse poem and deleted in the process one of my favorite visual images in the first draft, but as Don's bold and underlined modifier suggests, we do it very carefully, and with a great deal of respect.

The ways that we respond to poems reflect the assumptions we make about where poems come from, about how they should be written, read, or revised, and about who has the right to decide what they mean. We seem to hold, simultaneously, two basic beliefs: one, a poem is an expression of the poet's soul, his sincere self as the Romantic philosophers would have put it, and that the poet is learning, through the mysterious process of writing, what he didn't know he knew; and two, that poetry is a craft, writing that can be re-read and revised, and the poet has a responsibility to her readers to shape the poem into the best poem she can. When the first belief holds
sway, we carefully protect the original text, as well as the poet's intentions for that text, by emphasizing that we are only a few readers who can only tell what we heard and what we liked. When the second belief comes to the forefront, we praise the craftsmanship of the poem or make suggestions for changes.

What a poem means depends on who owns the authority to say what it means at any given moment; when we respond to a poem, the group is, however temporarily, claiming that authority. We write a new version of the poem that exists in the conversation we are having, and that new version is, in a sense, the next draft. But the changes in the text, and our authorship, are only temporary – that draft belongs to the group, but the poem still belongs to the poet. Many of us feel, though, that the new “draft” of our poem which the group gives us is a gift. The poetry group provides a setting for poetry, a place where we can define what it is we do as poets by doing it, by watching others do it, by listening in and collaborating and sharing; we have built a community of skilled respondents with diverse techniques, and practiced the writing, reading, and re-reading of poetry together over and over, so that now we trust one another to add to our understanding of our own poems, and then to give them back to us, to revise with or without the group's vision, as we choose.
CHAPTER TWO

CONNECTED WITH THE HEART

I met Jim the very first time I attended a meeting of the poetry group, but it wasn't his first meeting; he had been part of the group for several months prior to my arrival. Later, he told me about how he had come to be a participant. An assistant dean of admissions on a satellite campus, he was able to enroll in classes at the university, and he had been taking a graduate poetry workshop on campus. But he was not enjoying the course, mostly because of the competitiveness of the group. It wasn't his first graduate creative writing class; in fact, he had worked with the same poet previously, in a course which he had appreciated because he saw it as a "celebration" of poetry.

"I'm not against competition, per se," he told me, "but there's some elements of that, when they work into a writing workshop, that are counterproductive." In the workshop he was taking immediately prior to discovering our group, he told me, the competitiveness of some of his classmates contributed to an atmosphere that kept him from producing his best work.

"I just found some of the criticism was mean. Mean-spirited." He went on to explain that he was "particularly vulnerable at that time because I was having some doubts about my ability to write, and my commitment to writing and all that kind of stuff."

"I went into that [workshop] kind of banged up, in a sense, but also feeling a tremendous pressure to hit home runs with everything that came
out. So I needed to do something that was more nurturing than I found. I would end up leaving those classes very frustrated. And it totally screwed up my sense of what it was I was trying to accomplish with my writing. I started trying to play to the critics. And that was totally counterproductive. I just got too tight. So I couldn't get anything out. Because before I was even getting things on the paper, I was doing so much editing. I was turning in these things that I wasn't particularly happy with.”

But, although Jim was not happy with some of his work for the course, he retained his commitment to his poetry. “There were some good ideas, I think, in there,” he told me. “But they just needed to be in a less threatening environment so they could grow. I needed to get into a workshop...that I felt was more constructive.”

The need for a place for his poetry to be nurtured, to grow, seems important to Jim. During our last interview, he told me, “I want to get together with people to read poetry because I like poetry, and I want it to be a positive experience. That doesn't mean you go into the group and you get accolades. But I want there to be some sense of celebration. And kind of reaffirming that, hey, what we're doing is, in some ways, special, it's valued, and damn it, it's fun.”

Fortunately, Drew, who was a long time member of our poetry group, overheard Jim talking about how unpleasant he was finding the graduate workshop. “Drew heard me talking about that, and he said, hey, you know, I'm kind of hooked up with a group of folks who are pretty nice, and there's not that element of tension that you've just described. Why don't you give me some of your stuff and I'll bring it to the group and see if there's some agreement that you ought to be added. So that's how it happened.”
I'm glad it did happen, because it gave me the chance to meet Jim, and to share his work. I admire Jim’s poetry; he has a wonderful way with narratives, and an eye for the details of human interactions which I envy, and which I noticed in the very first of his poems I read, the poem he shared the first night I came to the group:

_Straightening_

_Come weekends_
_Ma would fry her hair_
_before heading to A.M.E. Zion._

_The Sterno fire_
_was my Sunday dawn._
_I awoke to_
_her big mahogany bones_
_working at a rustling_
_t.v. tray stocked_
_with Royal Crown hair dress,_
_propped up hand mirror,_
_straightening comb,_
_and a crackling can of flame._

_There were transformations_
_at each passing of the comb._
_Her dark, just washed hair_
_converted from an angry flinch_
_to a lazier lengthened sheen._

_And when she was done,_
_lid back on Sterno can_
_and flame having swallowed itself,_
_Ma stepped through_
_the lingering veil of burning,_
_into her lavender Sunday dress,_
_into her proper spot_
_at the heart of A.M.E. Zion_
_where an immense Negro minister_
_in a black robe with purple trim,_
_speaking gravel,_
_working like a bellows,_
_warned of worldly evils_
_and demanded that we all bow our heads and pray_
_to the Lord whose image was painted_
_at the front of the altar,_
_a Lord standing even more immense than he,_
hands outstretched,  
palms open, welcoming,  
placid blue eyes,  
hair long, straight, golden, and radiating  
an aura that clearly touched my Ma.

— James Washington, Jr.

I quickly learned to appreciate Jim as a respondent as well as a poet; his contributions to our group discussions were cogent and thoughtful. I particularly liked his penchant for paraphrasing the meaning of a poem as he saw it, before offering any suggestions for changes, or even pointing to specific features of the poem he likes. He has a talent for constructing almost narrative readings of poems, finding a story, with a beginning, middle and end, in poems that it wouldn't have occurred to me could be read that way. He seems to search for something, some person or object or idea, to serve as the “main character” in a plot that the poem presents. The result often leads me to interesting insights about the poem.

I now believe that in constructing this kind of paraphrase of other people's poems, Jim is practicing a version of the Golden Rule: Do unto other [people's poems] as you would have them do unto [yours.] What he wants from respondents seems to be the same kind of carefully paraphrased interpretations of the whole poem which he is so skillful at constructing for other people's poetry. Jim wants to understand what people see in the poem before listening to their suggestions. He very respectfully receives and considers other kinds of response, but he particularly values knowing what kind of meaning we have found in a particular poem, intellectually and emotionally; he wants to know how the poem has affected our heads and our hearts.

Unfortunately, during the time I was taping meetings Jim was not
always getting what he wanted from our group. He felt ambivalent about our discussions of his poems, not because of any sense of competitiveness — we were more nurturing than the university workshop which he hadn't liked — but because he was frustrated on several other fronts. He felt that some suggestions, instead of being grounded in a coherent vision of the poem's intentions, were based, instead, on arbitrary rules about poetry, of which he didn't necessarily see the validity. More importantly, he often felt that his respondents didn't understand his own intentions for the poem; how could they suggest changes without knowing where he “was coming from”? People were not telling him how they understood the poem before making suggestions, and he was unable to evaluate their suggestions without knowing, first, where they were coming from.

**Framing Response: The Context for Suggestions is Interpretation**

When six of us met to discuss our work in my living room, one evening in March, we talked about Jim's poem *Elevator Operators* for quite some time before anyone said anything explicit about what the poem might mean. We talked about our connections with the topic of the poem, the human operators of elevators who used to frequent large department stores, and we offered suggestions for changing the poem, but when Jim explained his own intentions for the poem, towards the end of the conversation, it was clear that our suggestions would not further his vision.
Elevator Operators

Before the malls
when downtowns still lived,
shopping was all vertical
at Gilchrist’s, Filene’s,
Jordan’s and such;
departments sewn together
by elevator cables,
seamstresses grown familiar
and varicose at controls.

From lingerie to fragrance,
neckties to home furnishings,
with constant push and pull
on safety doors’ accordion steel,
plate glass and brass,
they delivered each time
a journey conclusion before release:
Watch your step, please.
Please, watch your step.
The caution now faded
but understood.

— James Washington, Jr.

Jim didn’t offer any explanations of his intentions for the poem immediately, nor did he ask any questions, or point out any problems he saw in the poem himself; in the style of many graduate creative writing workshops, he read the poem and then waited through our discussion, listening quietly, occasionally offering a joke or asking for a clarification, obviously paying close attention to our response to his poem. But eventually it became clear that none of us had constructed an interpretation of the poem that came close to his intentions at all, when he explained that he probably had quite a bit more “building” to do, because we did not see the “direction” he “had in mind.”

“Actually, I’m pretty sure it’s not coming through,” he told us. “My intent here was actually, as I started working on it, a kind of a nostalgic
piece, dealing specifically with the death of vital areas of cities and downtown. More people fled cities and all that stuff started happening."

Before the malls
when downtowns still lived,
shopping was all vertical

No one said anything; we were all listening carefully.

"You know: what's changed?" he asked rhetorically. "Well, a lot of things have changed, but for some reason I was worrying about elevator operators, who have totally disappeared, displaced by technology and all those kind of things. And what I'm trying to have click there is that the warning that the elevator operators were offering, saying watch your step, was essentially saying look where you're going, in the sense of pay attention to where you're headed, and in the broader sense, pay attention to where your future is going."

they delivered each time
a journey conclusion before release:
Watch your step, please.
Please, watch your step.
The caution now faded
but understood.

He went on to explain the future as a time when the "downtowns," the "vital areas," would die: "What we're heading for is the gutting of a lot of things which are not so bad," he said, "and there are a number of things we can read into our own nostalgic version." He mentioned that people, "folks" like the operators, are displaced by the death of urban centers, and that "we all kind of shop outside the cities in the malls," and, he said, there were "a whole bunch of other issues."

"Certainly I don't think in one poem I can capture all of it. I'm not even sure I should try to capture it all, but I wanted to get closer," he
concluded.

In terms of provoking a response from the group to the idea of urban decay, he had not come close at all. Not only had we missed the intentions behind the poem, but we had offered several suggestions which, if carried out, would have directly undermined those intentions. The text we had constructed together reflected a kind of nostalgia, but we had not expressed or recognized concern about urban decay, or sympathy for the people it displaced.

Nostalgia, in fact, was one of the group's main reactions to the poem. Don had started off our conversation, directly addressing Jim, in that nostalgic vein: "I didn't think you were old enough to remember all these," he said. "My father worked at all these places. Also he worked at Houghton's, Filene's, Jordan's, Dutton's, Hubby's, White's, Stern's, Shepard's..." He was referring to, and gleefully adding to, Jim's list of downtown department stores.

shopping was all vertical
at Gilchrist's, Filene's,
Jordan's and such;

Jim laughed. "I didn't throw Raymond's in there!" Don's nostalgic connection to the poem set the tone for one main type of response we provided for this poem: connections between the text and our own experiences. Over the course of the conversation, Brock and I each made other personal connections, and Sarah told us she was reminded of the British comedy set in a department store, Are You Being Served? Our experiences, as residents of a small town in New Hampshire, may have lead most of us to readings of the poem which overlooked the whole issue of urban decay, an issue which may have been closer to home for Jim, who
grew up in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Don, who has a few years on most of us, has had more personal experience with elevator operators, but even with his prior knowledge, he made mostly nostalgic connections.

"Each store had its own elevator operators," he told us. "There would be the Irish women in one store, the dignified Black gentlemen in another store. They all came from the underclass, compared to the people in the store. But they were all the same. I mean, you didn't find a Black elevator operator and then next door a shrunken Irish woman elevator operator. They were in different stores."

"Each store had its own kind of elevator operator?" I asked, to clarify. This seemed like an unlikely scenario, to me, and the idea made me uncomfortable. Did these groups of people gather in separate department stores because they had things in common, or did the department stores hire homogeneous groups because of some kind of odd aesthetic? And why did it make me uncomfortable? Jim is the only African American in our group; I wanted to know if the ethnic characteristics of the elevator operators were important to his intentions for the poem. That's not what I asked, though, and Don answered my spoken question; yes, each store had its own kind of elevator operators.

"'Central casting?'" he joked. "'I need four more women, Irish women.'" Jim and several others people laughed, and the joke distracted me from my unspoken questions; I did not have, in any case, enough of a grasp of my own interpretation of the poem to frame the question in terms of the text, and it seemed inappropriate to put it in political terms.

A little bit later, Don reminisced again, this time about department stores he had visited in Europe. "One of the things we do a lot when we're traveling in Europe is we lunch in department stores, which are
wonderful places.”

“Really?” asked Ralph.

“Oh, yeah. Stockholm, all over Europe. But the stores are still there, the vertical shopping is still there in Stockholm.” The nostalgic tone of the conversation might have been what prompted Jim’s comment later on that “there are a number of things we can read into our own nostalgic version” of urban decay, but this conversation, by referring to cities which still maintain their centralized character and by ignoring the issues of who exactly gets displaced when a city dies, had a much cheerier tone.

Brock did bring power issues back into the conversation with his next comment, though, when he told us a connection he made to the poem. “My experience with elevator operators is this guy at Park Avenue, where I used to date this girl,” he told us. “I was just terrified of going to New York. He had so much control, because he would sort of let me on, or not let me on, and I had to prove to him that I was worthy to go up to the twelfth floor. And so I bring this sense of elevator operators as elevated people; that’s totally wrong for the poem.”

But with this story, Brock simultaneously points to and defuses the issue. Elevator operators, in his story, are “elevated people.” They are people who are in control; the man in Brock’s story had power. When he points out that “that’s totally wrong for this poem,” he is recognizing that in his story, the usual power relationships are inverted. In Jim’s reading of his own poem, elevator operators are not elevated, but displaced, ghostly voices with warnings which were not heeded, and Brock may be recognizing this. But at the same time, because both the image of Brock as a nervous, young suitor and the pun in his phrase “elevated people” made several of us chuckle, the tension surrounding the fact that we are, for the
most part, more privileged, more likely to identify with elevator riders than displaced elevator operators, was defused. We did not discuss why the notion of elevator operators being elevated people is "totally wrong for this poem." Instead of focusing on the possible political meaning of either the poem, or of Brock's story in the context of the poem, we moved, after our chuckle, and then a bit of a pause, into a discussion of the sounds in the poem.

"I just love the phrase elevator operators," Sarah said.

"Yes," Brock answered, "it sounds so good."

"You could have some fun with this," Don said. "The elevator operators also announce, in many cases, the different floors. Women's lingerie, men's suits. Junior Miss. Sports Coats. In other words, it gives the feeling of that vertical shopping. Housewares. Toys."

"That might be interesting, also, because there's no voice, in terms of the elevator operators' actual voices," I added, "except for Watch your step please. Please watch your step. The rest of it seems to do more with the elevators than with the operators. Cables, and the brass..."

\begin{verbatim}
with constant push and pull
on safety doors' accordion steel,
plate glass and brass,
\end{verbatim}

"And so by the time that I got to the Watch your step, I'd forgotten that there were operators, because I was focused so much on the elevators." We talked about the automatic voices which were installed in some elevators after elevator operators went out of style. The lack of human operators, and their human voices, seemed to be important to how most of us were tentatively connecting to, or trying to make sense of the text at this point. We almost touch, here, on the loss Jim later told us he
intended to express in the poem, the displacement of human beings. But, perhaps because we are talking about the sounds of the poem, a formal aspect of the text, we don't actually address that loss, or what it might mean in terms of the poem.

In addition to the nostalgic connections we made to the poem, and the discussions of the formal aspects we appreciated, the group provided a third type of response: we made several direct suggestions for changes to the text. Our inability, or perhaps reluctance, to articulate any paraphrases of the whole poem, however, led us to make suggestions which, instead of being grounded on explicit interpretations, as Jim would like, were based in implicit readings of the poem, or emphasized lesser features of the text. At the beginning of our conversation, for example, Don had moved straight from his list of department stores to a suggestion: "I don't like the and such. I think you need more names."

at Gilchrist's, Filene's, Jordan's and such;

"Well, you certainly did provide quite the list!" I said, to Don, and Brock backed me up: "Names if you need them."

"A catalogue of them," Jim said, a little wryly. But no one seconded Don's suggestion, or argued with it either. No one was inspired to defend either Jim's short list, in the original text, or Don's longer one, which came from his own story. Perhaps this suggestion was designed to further Don's vision of the poem as a nostalgic description: the more specific, the better.

Brock made another suggestion after the silence which greeted Don's idea. "I don't think you need the second line," he said.

Before the malls
when downtowns still lived, shopping was all vertical

He continued, reading his change, “Before the malls/ shopping was all vertical.” Sarah agreed, and I nodded yes, as well. Don agreed, too, adding that it was a “good cut.” The suggested change would more closely juxtapose the horizontal shopping malls of the present with the image of shopping as vertical, emphasizing the comparison. We were responding to the juxtaposition of two images, malls and vertical shopping; emphasizing the contrast between lines one and three, we seem to have ignored completely whatever meaning line two is intended to add to the poem.

There was another pause in the discussion, and then Jim said, “I just want to try this again,” looking down at his poem. “What was the last recommendation?”

“Just cut the second line,” I said. Jim looked puzzled, but he made a mark on his copy and didn’t say anything. We didn’t realize it at the time, but that second line, when downtowns still lived, was central to Jim’s intentions for his poem; without that line the meaning of the poem, as he saw it, changed drastically. He didn’t say anything, then, though, and we moved on to other suggestions.

“I’d cut off the last two lines,” Don said, “because I think the Watch your step, please. Please, watch your step… That’s my ending.”

they delivered each time
a jouncy conclusion before release:
Watch your step, please.
Please, watch your step.

Again, unknowingly, Don had hit on two lines which were important to Jim’s conception of the poem, but again, we didn’t realize that yet. Brock however, immediately began to try and fit those last two
lines, *The caution now faded/but understood*, into his understanding of the whole poem. The ending that Don proposed was dramatic, and interesting, but might we be missing something if we couldn't find an interpretation for those last two lines which fit the rest of the poem?

"I was trying to understand the last two lines," Brock said. "I didn't feel like I had it yet. I mean, was it fading because there are no operators? Or...?" He left his question hanging in the air for someone else to pick up.

We often find ourselves suggesting that the poet cut off the last few lines of a poem, or even the last stanza, because many of us, not trusting the poem to say what we want it to, add summarizing tags at the end. Brock may have felt Jim had done that here, and was inviting us to read those lines as that type of summarizing tag. Ralph took him up the challenge.

"I figure," Ralph offered, "these people say it so many times...I mean, after you say it a thousand times, at some point your *caution* becomes *faded*." That seemed like a reasonable explanation for me. The meaning of the elevator operators' caution washed out with use, so that, although the elevator riders could hear it, they were no longer warned. Others seemed to like that explanation, too; several people nodded.

But Ralph went on: "I'm not sure that that's the logical conclusion to your poem." He had helped us to see what a *faded caution* might be, but not what it had to do with the rest of the poem. Brock and Ralph's tentative interpretations did not give us enough to go on; we might have been able to come to a more definitive consensus had we understood Jim's intention for the poem. But we were still working through our own vision for it, and the best we could come up with seemed to be that it was a purely nostalgic description of a phenomena – human elevator operators – now long gone.
By outlining here all the places where our conversation about Jim’s poem strayed from his intentions, I don’t mean to imply that we are, in any way, searching for the “right” interpretation, the one that Jim intended, or that the only meaning possible for the poem lies within his intentions. Nor do I mean to imply that all suggestions for revision are useless unless they further the poet’s original intentions. But Jim was disappointed in our response. As he told us, he was “pretty sure the direction” he “had in mind” was not “coming through.”

Clearly, part of his disappointment was that he was not able to express, with the poem, his dismay over the decay of “downtowns.” His own intentions for the poem, and his own reading of it, had meaning for him that we just didn’t get. Jim has been a member of our group long enough that he seems to be able to anticipate some of the types of response he’ll receive, and even reconcile himself to response in advance. He told me during an interview that, “I’ll sometimes be working on something that I really enjoy, and I’ll say, ‘Well, I know so-and-so is going to say they don’t get this, or they want to chop this line off, or whatever. Or chop this stanza out.’ And I go, ‘well, that’s all right.’ If I like it, or I think it’s in there for a purpose, I’ll give it a shot.” He has a strong sense of ownership of the text: it’s his intentions for the poem which are important, and some suggestions he will just pass over because they don’t fit into his vision.

On the other hand, if he hears some kind of consensus in the group, he is willing to negotiate: “If I see some patterns developing, where folks that I hadn’t anticipated say the same kinds of [things] while we’re responding, there was a common agreement that this was a problem area, then you probably need to listen to that.” So another part of his disappointment with our response to *Elevator Operators* was that we were
not able to find any consensus, to second one another’s suggestions, or to root our suggestions in an articulated vision of our own of what the poem might be about. In an interview later, he told me that he was sometimes frustrated by respondents who attended more to what was not working in a poem, without articulating how the poem does work: “When discussion opens up – and I’m not talking about just discussions of my own pieces, but listening to discussions of other pieces,” he told me, “it sounds like the accent is very much on what’s not working, or what’s not in there. Often before there’s been a chance to discuss what is working in there. And I don’t find that helpful.”

Some of his objection to the emphasis on what’s not working is, again, his sense of ownership. “It can be helpful to make recommendations for revisions,” he told me, like “‘Oh, I might take this line out, I might put this line up here, I might drop that paragraph,’ or whatever; we all do things like that. But there seems to be a certain amount of zeal about rewriting folks’ poetry! And damn it, I don’t think that’s always right. In fact, often I don’t think it’s right. I think it’s trespassing, in a sense. I think you can make it clear to a writer what kinds of things are or aren’t working and have the writer do the work, as to making some of the cuts and so forth.”

But, as he continued, it was clear that if suggestions were “framed” in a clearly articulated vision of their effect on how the respondent interprets the poem, the meaning of the poem to the reader, that they would be easier for him to hear. “I don’t want to be so emphatic about it,” he said. “I don’t want to rule out discussions of oh, ‘what would happen if you got rid of’... whatever, you know... Because I think it could be legitimate. If somebody said, ‘gee, you know, if this were cut, if I read this
without this in here, here's what I'd be hearing.' But I don't always hear the discussion about cutting, and so forth, framed in that sense. Well, it's a little bit more surgical, I think, without a nice full context for the surgery.” Response, especially suggestions for changes in the text, needs to be framed in the context of interpretation, whether that interpretation is found in group consensus or articulated by one individual.

After Jim had told us his vision for the poem, a couple of people made comments which helped us realign our group’s interpretation. Hildred said that the imagery in the poem, because it was “intriguing,” got her “interested again” in department stores, and therefore inner cities. Sarah said, about the British comedy on PBS, Are You Being Served?: “You get a sense that it’s a little microcosm, a community, and there’s all this business going on...we don't have that here.” Her comment evokes the nostalgia we’d already been expressing, but it goes one step further by pointing to our loss of a sense of community: “We don't have that here.” After some thought about the poem in this new light, we were also able to make a couple of suggestions. Brock, pointing out that the elevator operators’ warnings were already quite ominous, suggested adding an inside point of view.

“I wonder if you could possibly work in a listener,“ he said, “in the second stanza. Somebody listening, you know, or remembering, [and thinking] we should have heeded their commands, Watch your step. Or whatever; somehow get that sense in. Because it seems to me that Watch your step, please, please watch your step does an awful lot of what you were describing.”

There were nods from around the room.

“You just have to somehow apply it to more than just getting out of
the elevator,” Brock concluded.

Don suggested that maybe the piece could be part of a series of poems. “That would give you a kind of urban landscape,” he suggested. “I don't know if you can get that all into this poem, but I could see this poem being part of it.”

“That's a good point,” Ralph agreed. “If it was a series of poems, and then it ended with Watch your step, please, please watch your step, I think that might give a kind of resonance to it.”

Since Jim values suggestions for revision which are made in the context of a “general sense” of what the poem is about, and since we are clearly able to offer some suggestions after we hear his intentions for the poem, one might ask why he doesn't offer his own paraphrase of the poem earlier in the discussion. I suspect this is partly due to his experiences in creative writing workshops at the university; poets are often required to be silent while the rest of the class discusses a poem. Or perhaps, since Jim himself clearly feels that response is more useful if framed in the reader's interpretation, he wants to hear what we would come up with first, to see if the poem is “coming across” without reference to his intentions; I find myself using the habit of silence I learned in creative workshops to help myself listen for my reader's interpretations, as I did when the group discussed my lighthouse poem, and Jim may be doing the same thing. In this case, it seems to have backfired; our response was not as useful as it might have been had we known what he had in mind. But there are other times when Jim's background in those same academic workshops works to his advantage; for one thing, he is able, by thinking of himself as separate from his own poem, to use his text to work through difficult personal issues. Unfortunately, we are not always able to keep up with
Dislocations: Separating the Poet from the Poem

Jim told me, during an interview, about his grandmother's failing health. "It's hard to watch. And I've always been, you know, I use my grandmother as a model. She's never been afraid of the next year, or getting old or anything like that. She's a very spiritual person, first of all. I've always admired her outlook on life. But I've never had that confidence I think she had, when she was my age, thinking about old age or whatever. I tend to be a little bit more, I don't want to say afraid, but depressed by the prospect. But she's never been like that. So watching what's going on for someone who has been incredibly optimistic and independent and so forth, and seeing it starting to look a little bit shaky – it's not bleak, but it's starting to crumble – it's doing some weird things. It's adding to my pessimism about that phase."

I asked him if his pessimism about getting older was tempered with a little fear, as well.

"Yes, sure!," he answered, "without a doubt. So I think in some weird way that's going to keep coming out in some things that I write. Because I think on some weird level I am, certainly, maybe not preoccupied, but on some level occupied."

Nowadays

I'm shifting at the checkout
in wait for the conveyor
to roll my Monitor and Lowenbrau.
Ahead there's commotion.
A stunted girl wails,
twists, tries to break from
the Lee Press On Nails
of her mother that
press into her wrist.
The mother is hot,
not old, and definitely doable;
all hose, mini, and stiletto heel,
not seeming to notice
or care that the store
is all eyes, ears and tribunal.
The girl is dancing anger,
reaches one more time
for the candy displays,
pulls down a tray of Skittles.
By the time I unbend
from restocking the shelf
mother and siren have cut an exit.
A verdict is quick
from the checkout woman
who wears demitasse frames:
Nowadays, she says. Nowadays!

Later, at home,
it is mother who calls.
There’s static on the line
during our howdyados.
What’s wrong? I ask.
It is her mother, she tells me,
who had a bad night last night,
terrible pain.
My grandmother is eighty-nine,
the spirit of independence.
I don’t think she can be
on her own anymore, my
mother says. She’ll have
to move in with one of us.
At this my mouth is chalky.
I consider my newest marriage,
the family we’ve just started,
and the thief of a job I’ve finally landed
that leaves barely enough time
to make even any of this work.
And now this to deal with, too.
Oh, Christ Almighty! Now this, too?

– James Washington, Jr.

While Jim was reading, this poem, we laughed out loud at
Nowadays, she says. Nowadays!, and at Oh, Christ Almighty! Now this, too? Don said, sarcastically, "I'm glad you're not getting into autobiographical stuff," and we all laughed again. So, despite the huge life issues the last stanza of the poem points to, our initial reaction was amusement. The tone of the poem is light, the images and language (Lee Press On Nails, definitely doable, the double entendre of siren, the howdyados of the second stanza) are colorful and interesting, and our first reaction to the poem was to enjoy it.

Our responses to and suggestions for this poem, when we got to them, were framed in attempts to articulate how we understood the poem; we seemed to give Jim the kind of response he wants. For example, Brock started a conversation which prompted an extended discussion of the motivations of the mother in the first stanza, and the relationship between those motivations and the overall meaning of the poem. "I wondered a little about the description of the mother," Brock said. "It seemed to be contradictory, and maybe that's your point, and I'm just being dense. Hot, not old, definitely doable – if I understand that, it goes without saying that she notices or cares."

The mother is hot,
not old, and definitely doable;
all hose, mini, and stiletto heel,
not seeming to notice
or care that the store
is all eyes, ears and tribunal.

"I mean, you described her as someone who's very aware of making an impression, and of the kinds of reactions that people around her are having to her," Brock continued. "And then the fact that she doesn't notice or care the store's all the eyes, ears, tribunal, I guess I don't believe it. Or, maybe that's all part of the act?"
“Well, I sort of believe,” Hildred answered, “because what I thought was, nowadays, if it had been anything about her press-on nails or her heels, she would have been mortified, but the child is really extraneous.”

“Right.” Jim nodded.

“It doesn't really quite get to her,” Hildred continued, “that people would criticize her for having an ill-behaved child. Which is part of the tragedy, I guess.”

“That's the way I'm trying to work it,” Jim said. He is voicing some of his intentions for the poem much earlier this time, possibly because Hildred is articulating her interpretations for him, and she is coming close to his intentions. I am not sure, if no one had answered Brock's confusion with an alternate reading of the mother’s apathy, whether Jim would have said anything or not. Brock nodded, however, and said okay, and then Jim expanded on Hildred’s comments. “Clearly the mother is brought into some focus,” Jim continued, “but it's the commotion that this kid's raising, and that folks tend to respond to that on some level, with discomfort, when they see this kind of thing. Here's this mother that doesn't really seem bothered by that. So I intended it along that line.”

“And it sort of goes with the dislocation of the generations in the next paragraph, somehow,” Hildred added. The mother in the first stanza is ignoring the discomfort her child is causing, seemingly more careful of the impression she makes herself – a kind of dislocation, or gap, between generations – and in the second stanza, two generations, mother and son, do seem to “notice” and “care” about a third, grandmother.

Later, Don picked up on Hildred’s comparison of the two halves of the poem, and pondered the possibility that they didn't really go together. “I'm not sure if these aren't separate poems,” he said. “It makes an awful
leap for me to go from the selfish woman to your mother's concern for her independent [mother]. I'm trying to make connections between the two, and I'm not sure I see them, anything other than the chronological one, and even that is rather trivial." The "chronological" connection is that the main events described in the two halves of the poem, the unruly child in the grocery store and the inter-generational phone conversation later, happen in the same day, a connection which is made explicit in the poem:

A verdict is quick  
from the checkout woman  
who wears demitasse frames:  
Nowadays, she says. Nowadays!

Later, at home,  
it is mother who calls.

"It's a wonderful glimpse of life," Don assured Jim, "and maybe it isn't trivial in what it's getting at. But I don't get the connection between these. You know, this crunch for the sandwich generation – you've got the kids, and you've got your mother, and the great-grandmother, too – and these are people who are understanding and concerned and caring," he said, describing the family in the second half of the poem. "The fact that you've got caring people against uncaring people is not..." He paused, unsure of how to continue. "I'm not sure that works."

"I had the same trouble," Ralph said. "I kept going back to that first stanza to try to make it work with the other, and I couldn't."

Though most of the group seemed to agree with Ralph and Don, Hildred argued that the two stanzas did play together. "I absolutely love the fact that there's the two poems there," she said, "and especially the way they come to those ends, so you have this summing up, Nowadays!, and Oh, Christ Almighty! The first is so clearly full of this sort of shallow view
of life, but then all of us who are going through this more complicated,
more harrowing view of life realize we have flights into this other view,
and you know, we're all just here, trying to survive. And that's why I
really like them together. I really like it a lot.”

I asked her, “So it's the break into exclamation into the end of each
that ties it together?”

“Well, yes,” she answered. “And plus that sort of generation, dealing
with the other generations, or sort of not dealing with the other
generations...I just really like that.”

At that point, I didn't understand the complicated resonance
between the two stanzas which Hildred really liked. “I'm still not
connecting them,” I said. “I want there to be more parallels between the
two people who say Nowadays, and Now this, too, and there's not.”

“I sort of like the fact that there are many ways in which they are not
connected,” Hildred said. “I would be very dissatisfied if they were
connected too much.”

“If they were completely parallel?” I asked.

“Very dissatisfied. Because now I just like that there's some way in
which they connect, that sense of being really uneasy about the whole
thing, and again, when am I being selfish and when am I not? The first
vision is very blatant, the woman is very much concerned with herself.” As
I look back on the conversation from the perspective of later conversations
with Jim, it seems that Hildred, with the question “When am I being
selfish and when am I not?” and the sense of uneasiness she finds in the
whole poem, has hit on the tension that Jim was trying to express. She's
comfortable with the fact that the question is not answered in the poem,
that it is revealed as complex, not easy to resolve; whereas Don had
classified the people in the two stanzas as “not caring” and “caring,”
Hildred has contrasted the two stanzas by saying one was full of a “shallow
view of life,” and the other a “complicated, more harrowing view of life.”

The discussion of Nowadays started off with Don joking about Jim
“getting into autobiographical stuff,” and some of us seem to have settled
into an assumption that the narrator and Jim are one and the same
person. That assumption, it seems, got in the way of most of the rest of us
reading the tension that Hildred appreciated in the poem – we don’t see
Jim as a selfish person, so we had a hard time seeing the narrator as a
person who would do anything other than the unselfish, caring thing. So,
for us, the questions were already resolved. Don, for example, argued this
way: “Well, you know, things are falling apart in the first [stanza], and
there’s this sort of modern, miserable little family that’s stepped right out
of those crummy little newspapers at the checkout rack. And so you kind of
expect that everything is really falling apart, …nowadays. But then the
second part is sort of sweet and old-fashioned. If the second part followed
the feeling and the sort of social set-up of the first one, that old
grandmother would be shipped off to some holding pen somewhere, you
know, with psycho green walls, and somebody would come visit her once
every six months…You go into this sort of dysfunctional thing, and then
you end up with a very functional thing. Because I know, even though you
say Christ Almighty, Now this too, I know you’re going to do something.”
It’s clear from the way that Don phrases it, “even though you say Christ
Almighty, Now this too, I know you’re going to do something,” that for
him, Jim and the narrator of the poem are one and the same, and that Don
believes that Jim will take care of his grandmother.

But Jim surprised him, and provided the turning point of the
conversation: “I'm not sure,” he said.

“You're not sure?” Drew asked.

“I'm not sure that grandma is taken care of,” said Jim.

“Yes?” asked Don, suddenly seeing the possible space between Jim and the narrator. “Well, maybe it's just that I see too much, read too much about what I know about you into there,” he said.

“That could be a problem,” Jim said, “because to an extent it draws from my autobiography, to come up with a voice or a character, or whatever, but there were a few things that I tried to work in here, to try to give some doubt about it. Or some doubts about, um, with respect to the person of the narrator. You find out later on, in the second stanza, that this guy, he's had a series of marriages, at least two, and he's sitting there in the first stanza, kind of checking out this woman...definitely doable...and that's not kind of old-fashioned, kind of clean cut stuff. There's some Nowadays there, as well. And I think the issues I'm trying to get at there, in addition to some of the ones you brought up, this issue of responsibility, how we handle responsibility?”

Jim has obviously intended this narrator to be a character, different from himself, different enough that he might do things Jim wouldn't. In a way, that difference allows Jim to explore parts of his own confusion about his grandmother and her changing life without having to completely claim those feelings. His narrator can consider courses of action that he himself would be uncomfortable with. And the crafting of the poem allows him to put those uncomfortable feelings, the unresolved question which Hildred considers the productive tension in the poem, into an artifact, a text outside of himself which he can read, and then to shape them into something that expresses his lack of resolve, but at the same time makes it
less uncomfortable because it is shaped.

At this point in the conversation, we had a choice to make: we could address the issues themselves, have a discussion about how we feel about our parents or grandparents and their independence, how we “handle responsibility,” or we could continue to look at the text, debating its internal consistency and considering how the general question of how people negotiate, or fail to negotiate, responsibilities is addressed by the specifics of the text. But Jim has already steered us towards the latter – he has described his intention for the poem by telling us about “this guy” and the contradictions in his life and character, and that’s what Hildred addresses when she responds to his comments.

“Well, I think it’s the working through all of those issues,” she said. “The working through all of those issues is what makes me like, again, that sense of being pulled in so many directions, and being unsure about being able to face these responsibilities...checking out the lady...and so on, that’s showing that ambivalence, but at the same time having this paradigm of total disaster, you know, sinking to the lowest of the low in the first part... Because I think I got the sense of the narrator being very troubled about that sense of which direction? And so having that sense of falling, before the possibilities to which one can sink.” When she says “it” is the “working through of all those issues,” “it” is the text. And it is “the narrator” who is very troubled.

“The tone I was hoping to finish out with,” Jim told her, “was gee, I have a lot on my plate right now. I’ve got a job, a second mortgage, ...and now really, how am I going to deal with this? What am I going to do? And if it were a more conventional kind of warmer world, a more traditional type of situation, there probably wouldn’t have been any doubt...gee, this is
family, we're taking this person in, we're taking care of this person."

“But also it does show that these people are considering that, that she'll have to move in,” Hildred pointed out. “I mean the traditional world is not lost, as it is so completely in the [first stanza].”

Although during this discussion all our suggestions were embedded in a spirited discussion of what the poem meant, it may have been that Jim's own continuing struggle with the issues described in the poem, his continuing distress at his own grandmother's failing health, made the discussion of the formal aspects of the poem not unhelpful, but perhaps irrelevant for the time being. When I asked Jim later if he had revised the poem, he said no.

“I haven't. Because I knew I would be revising it with too much of the wrong stuff. So I'm going to let it sit for a while. I'm definitely going to go back and revise it. I've got some things that I definitely want to do with it.”

I asked him what the “wrong stuff” he would be revising with was. "I think some of the wrong kinds of revisions," he said. “In other words, I think I should be revising based on some of the constructive criticism I received, but I still need time to filter that stuff out, and figure out really what was constructive and work that in there. Because if I were just to go back and accept a lot of what I heard, now, and use that as a guide for revising, it would be unfiltered, and I would probably end up with something that's totally other than what I wanted to do with that poem.” I am not sure what this “filtering” process Jim is referring to is; perhaps he needs to filter out suggestions some of us made while we were trying to get rid of the dissonance we felt between our knowledge of Jim as a person and our impression of the narrator. Those suggestions would not be useful to
him if he were to try to continue his own unfinished work with the poem, work that requires that he separate himself from the narrator.

Hildred was able to pick up on Jim’s clues, though, that he wanted the text to be treated as “object,” because his own unfinished work with the poem required a temporary objectification. Sometimes, we value the ability to look at a text as if it stands alone, separate from both a writer’s intentions and feelings, because it allows us to step away from sensitive areas.

The slippery part is being able to see what’s appropriate when, an accomplishment we would succeed at less often if we didn’t know one another well and work at listening to the poet and to one another. It requires careful, attentive listening to discover when a poet needs responses which allow the poet to understand how a poem has affected our heart, what Brock calls “human response,” and when a poet needs a more separate approach. Jim wants a group that can provide an atmosphere where his poems can “grow” and be “nurtured.” But, sometimes, the best way to nurture an idea is to let it stand on its own. Some of the procedures we have learned in creative writing workshops, by drawing a clear distinction between the poet and the poem, allow us to objectify a text, thereby protecting its author. That we are able to do this on occasion is evidence that we can provide an atmosphere where poets, as well as poems, can grow and be nurtured.

Connections: Reading Poetry with Your Heart and Your Head

Jim bristles at the notion that there might be an outside authority
who could establish “literary rules” about what one can and cannot do in a poem. For example, when he shared his poem *She Carries Rusted Scissors*, several people mentioned the pronoun in the title. What seems to have upset Jim the most about our reaction to the poem, however, was not the suggestion that he not use an anonymous pronoun, but the “tone” of the discussion about the pronoun. It was framed, he felt, in terms of “rules.” He felt that the emphasis on rules, on what you can or can’t do in a poem, kept people from being able to discuss the poem on its own terms. “I think that that discussion got started so early and so emphatically,” he told me, “that it affected all the discussion that came afterward.”

*She Carries Rusted Scissors*

She is back  
at the screen door  
of another night,  
centered in the rustle  
of black-swirl autumn.  
Composed with intent  
she trespasses.

Now inside-bedside,  
she draws back my covers,  
leans to kiss  
with a cross-stitch smile,  
and takes careful aim  
at the hem of my heart.

— James Washington, Jr.

Ralph had been the first to speak after Jim read the poem to us, and though he had immediately mentioned the anonymous *she*, he did not frame his comments in terms of rules.

“This is one of the poems that for me,” Ralph had started, “you know, I kind of try on myself. I want to climb into certain parts of the poem and really occupy them.” At the time, I thought that was a wonderful
thing for someone to say about a poem; he may have meant something like what I mean when I tell someone I want to “steal” their poem, make it my own. The anonymity of the woman in the title was, however, an obstacle to Ralph’s inhabiting this draft; he told us what he experienced as he read the poem: “the she is not immediately obvious, so I try the mother, which doesn’t quite work... So I’m left with sort of like a female entity, or spirit, which is fine.”

No one responded, at that time, to Ralph’s comment about the anonymous “she” in the poem, and we moved on to some of the other suggestions we had, but when Don brought it up again later in the conversation he did mention “rules,” though it was in a very conditional way: “...if we were going to have poetic rules...” We rarely discuss conventions during our group meetings; we don’t debate language, images, or punctuation in terms of what is acceptable or what is not acceptable in a poem in general. Valued conventions are implicit in the ways we respond to particular features of a poem, but we try to respond to a poem in terms of how it is “working” rather than in terms of which conventions it successfully displays, and Don’s “if we were to...” makes it clear that he knows it’s not quite appropriate, in this group, to mention rules. In fact, Brock teased Don the evening we discussed She Carried Rusted Scissors, because he had already mentioned pronouns in two other poems: “That seems to be your irritant of the night,” Brock said.

“It’s probably a thing of mine that I must correct,” Don had admitted.

But Jim apparently heard much more of a call to outside authority than Don intended. In an essay composed after our discussion, he wrote, about our questioning of the anonymous pronoun:
...I wondered how the pronoun-usage-rule-of-thumb known to experienced writers had eluded me, a thirty-six year old experienced writer, or so I had thought. It seemed that I must have been off at the punch bowl alone, seeking refreshment, when clusters of knowledgeable academicians established literary rules.

"I'm not saying that the discussions weren't constructive in some ways," Jim told me, during our conversation later, "but I think they were really directed by the way things started. Whereas had they started from another point, in terms of what kinds of things you were getting out of the poem, and what kind of an effect that was having, in terms of who you think the she is, or whatever, that might have tapped into my intent a little more." Although Ralph actually had tried to explain his own reading of who she might be, at the beginning of the discussion, Jim focused on the later reference to rules.

Jim may be struggling with the differences he sees between "objective" and "subjective" response to his poems. When he talks about people responding to his poems, he uses phrases like "how did it strike you?" He is much more interested in hearing our responses to his poems in terms of how they "struck us" than in terms of how they measure up to any set of objective criteria. Jim wants us to tell him how we understand a poem in terms of "what kinds of things you were getting out of the poem, and what kind of an effect that was having" on us.

In fact, it may be that Jim feels it is not possible to read a poem without taking a subjective stance. The autumn after I finished taping our meetings I arranged to interview Jim after a meeting of a graduate seminar he was taking; he had just been accepted into the Masters in Writing program at the university, with a concentration in poetry, and as
he had already taken several of the graduate poetry workshops, he was working on some of the other requirements by taking a seminar in autobiographical criticism. We met in the recently deserted seminar room, and talked, among other things, about the essays he had written for the course. In one, he described early influences on his own ways of reading literature. He wrote, "In elementary school I was introduced to poetry by a teacher whose name I have forgotten but whose style of instruction I still admire. She taught me the reading of poetry as an act of discovery through the identification of the familiar." He went on to cite a Countee Cullen poem, *Incident*, as one which that elementary teacher had "helped me to discover" and which "remains among my favorites."

In that same essay, Jim also described some of the college teachers who introduced him to the practices of literary criticism, including "Roger." "Roger," he wrote, "wore glasses with dark frames. He struck me as being a bona fide intellectual, cerebrally engaged but somewhat inert in spirit and emotion," who "...when insisting that literature be viewed though his critical lens succeeded in making reading a sterile and lonely exercise for me."

"In short," he continued, "Roger was an objective critic to an extreme." The difference between the two teachers, and the ways Jim understands how they want him to read poetry, could be described on that continuum, from "objective," as Roger was "to an extreme," to "subjective" — perhaps that is what Jim meant when he wrote that his elementary teacher showed him how to discover poetry "through the identification of familiar truths." What he knew to be true, subjectively or, if you will, in his heart, he recognized in the Cullen poem.

Jim sees the reading of poetry as an activity which should involve
the "heart." About poetry groups in general, he wrote, "Often in these forums there seems to be an ongoing tension between the personal and more objective critical approaches."

To catch a chill in some poetry groups, one need only to imply that the poem read has connected with the heart. Thus, instead of stating "I like this poem" and then feeling free to offer a more cerebral explanation of that initial reaction, group leaders often instead will urge openers such as "what I hear you saying," or "what works for me here is."

When a reader prefaces her comments about a poem with "what I hear you saying" she is framing her comments in an interpretation of the poem, a type of feedback Jim values, but Jim feels that this kind of interpretation hasn't "connected with the heart," that it is distanced or "cerebral." He wrote that "it is often impractical if not impossible for me to ingest or understand poetry while so distanced." He clearly wants to respond to poetry on an emotional level, with his emotions, or, to use his terms, his soul and his heart.

But he does call on more objective procedures when, as a reader, a subjective approach to the poem doesn't work for him. "I subscribe to North American Review," he told me in an interview, "and I go right to the poetry section. That often is inaccessible poetry to me, though. It doesn't connect to the soul or heart, or sometimes even brain. It seems to go screeching over my head sometimes." Jim wants to know a poem with his soul or heart. But although it may not always work to turn to his "brain," as in his description here, it is a strategy he falls back on.

Jim wants his own readers to approach his poems in the same way that he reads other people's poetry. But he is not looking for purely emotional responses; he wants explanations. He wants to understand how we understand. He described the way that a valued respondent phrased
her response: “She gets right to the issue, and says what she sees going on in there, and maybe what’s not going on in there.” He wants to see how we see, our “way of looking” at the poem, and in order to be able to tell him this, we have to be able to analyze the poem as well as react to it.

But he does suspect that being “once removed” from the poem, not allowing the poem to interact with your heart, allows people to discuss more of what doesn’t work in a poem than what does. In his essay, Jim described an interesting theory about “unwritten ground rules for criticism” which “discourage responses based upon emotion or the personal experience.” He suggests that respondents who take an objective stance may be trying to protect the writer:

Interestingly, good manners may be the engine driving the “once removed” critical approach. The assumption perhaps being that it is more humane and safe to hit the poet in the head with criticism than in the heart. But if tapes of many group sessions were reviewed, I suspect that what the what-works-for-me-here practitioners would quickly discover is that they actually spend much of their time discussing what doesn’t work for them.

If he’s right, perhaps the reason that it’s easier to talk about what’s not working is because being “once removed” is similar to playing Peter Elbow’s “doubting game” – it is much easier to doubt a poem which you have not let touch your heart, much easier to believe in one you have. Jim struggles with the dichotomy he sees between the “head” and the “heart,” but what he wants from his readers is response that comes from both, working together.
Cross Purposes

Ostensibly, the purpose of our group is to respond to poems. Our explicit purpose is to read texts and interpret them, and then to suggest ways that they might be changed for the better. Suggestions should grow out of the interpretations we are making; in other words, unless there is some coherent vision of what the poem is trying to convey, it doesn’t make any sense to make changes designed to further that vision. Unfortunately, the connection between interpretation and suggestion can be misconstrued as a step-by-step procedure – read the poem, interpret it, suggest changes – and that is a severe oversimplification of an extremely complex problem. The complications arise in several places.

First, what does is mean to read and interpret the poem? We hear the poem aloud, and each read it to ourselves, and then we may or may not be told the poet’s intentions for the poem. Knowing those intentions will change how we interpret the poem. Does reading a poem include reading the author’s intentions, or worries, or questions about his text – a stance which places the emphasis on the writer not the text – or does it mean reading the text as an object which must stand on its own? Secondly, an interpretation is can be an individual reading, or a reading negotiated by the group. There may be more than one interpretation of the poem, some of which match the writer’s intentions more closely than others. Whose interpretation should be authorized by the group? Should the group offer only suggestions based on the interpretation which mostly closely matches the intention of the author? And third, if there are alternative interpretations vying for the group’s attention, how will the poet be able to sort out, or “filter,” as Jim says, the suggestions made? And what happens
if, as in our discussion of Jim’s poem *Elevator Operators*, there is no interpretation articulated during the discussion to frame the suggestions?

If we assume that the purpose of the group is to improve the particular poem, then we can address these complications by insisting that we need to act as if the text stands alone, that the meaning of the poem is the one negotiated by the group, not necessarily the one intended by the author, and that we can then make suggestions designed to further that meaning. These suggestions are text-based. However, if we assume that the purpose of the group is to help the poet further his vision, then we need to act as if the poet and the poem are not separable, and listen for the poet’s intentions and assumptions carefully while offering interpretations and suggestions, in a sense reading both poem and poet.

When I spoke with him last, Jim was still pondering his satisfactions and dissatisfactions with our poetry group’s responses to his poems. In general, we are a much more nurturing, and less competitive, group than some of those he had encountered on campus, but he wasn’t sure that we always gave him the kind of responses he needed. Both Jim’s idea of the appropriate way to respond to a poem in our group’s idea of what the purpose of response is, of what it means to respond to a poem, contain tensions which are at the root of this ambivalence. Because, in fact, we make both assumptions – that the purpose of response is to improve the text, and that the purpose of response is to help the poet – at varying times during our discussions. We simultaneously value the interpretations of the reader, because the poem is a text which should be readable, and the intentions of the poet, because poetry is the heart’s expression.

What this means is that we are sometimes working at cross
purposes, which puts not only the individual poet, but the other participants in the conversation, in the a position where it is necessary to move carefully from one type of response to another, and to be able to tell when those moves are necessary. We have to be flexible, to give response based in our relationship with Jim when it seems appropriate, and more objective text-based response when he leads us that way.
CHAPTER THREE
THE POET CALLS IN HIS OWN COORDINATES

Brock has extensive experience as a reader of and respondent to other people's writing. He has a degree in creative writing and graduate degrees in English literature, and in English Language, Literature and Pedagogy, and works regularly as a professional writer, and ghostwriter, of prose. He is also a skillful teacher of writing, and I first began to appreciate his collegial attitude and his willingness to share ideas when we were both teaching freshman English at the university. But although he has so much experience working with writers in groups, he considers this poetry group a new thing: "For me, this is play," he told me. "I've never really considered myself a poet." He identifies our group as an "adult writing group," different from the poetry classes he took in college, as well as the other adult groups he has participated in since -- a couple of fiction writing workshops, and a "writing process group" which included Don and other members of the university English department.

About the latter, which was eleven or twelve years ago, when Brock was a relative newcomer at the university, he told me, in a typically self-deprecating way, "I don't know how I got into that. I guess it was just Don being nice, as usual. He invited me in." Don's willingness to support him, as writer and teacher, has been important to Brock, and they have developed a strong professional relationship. Brock sees Don as his mentor. Of course, many of us in the group do; Don's writing and teaching about the writing process has been influential in our university community, as well
as in the field of composition studies, and those of us who have taught at the university have borrowed his classroom methods and depended on his wisdom and generosity. He also plays the role of facilitator in the poetry group, maintaining the mailing list and making sure that we always know where we are meeting next. Brock, though, has developed a special relationship with Don in the years that he's been at the university. Don has invited him to join writing groups, read and responded to his work, and visited his classroom. And recently Brock told me that Don had “re-invented” him as a poet, just as he “invented” him as a business writer and then as an essayist, by using one of his poems in his newest book and referring to him as “the poet Brock Dethier.” About participating in this group, Brock told me, “One of the major reasons I do it is just to be with Don, because Don’s the closest thing I’ve ever had to a hero, or a mentor. So I wanted to be in this just so I could be with him more, and talk with him more.”

Since he told me that he considered our poetry group “play,” I asked Brock if our group was fun. He said yes, but immediately qualified his statement: it is fun, but it can be also emotionally wearing. It was particularly so when he first started coming to the meetings; he described the first two meetings he went to as “by far the most emotionally important and extreme for me.”

“I didn’t understand quite what the operation was, so I brought two poems. One was just sort of a fun poem – I had written a whole series of pedagogical poems, and the one I brought was about revision as body work, and taking your poem-slash-car to Eddy’s Service Station…and how you shouldn’t be fiddling with your carburetor, if in fact your whole frame needs to be replaced, that sort of thing.” That poem, which I’ve borrowed to
give to students in my own classes, is fun – it’s also a good example of how Brock likes to play with language in his poems, and, judging from the staff meetings I have seen him facilitate and some of the writing exercises he uses in class, it’s also indicative of how his playfulness and love of language imbue his teaching.

**Eddie’s Full-Service Rewrite**

Revision is body work, overhaul  
Ratcheting straight the frame  
Replacing whole systems and panels  
Rummaging heaps of the maimed.  
With blowtorch and old rubber hammer  
Pound and pull, bend, use your ‘bar  
Salvage takes sweat, but it pays well  
(Though never rule out a new car).

Through editing, tuning, adjusting  
You get all the volts to the spark  
Knock all the gunk from the filters  
Set the timing right on the mark.  
Trade in your hammer for feeler gauge  
Test drive and listen, hush!  
A smooth-running engine’s a miracle  
Though mange mars the bucket seats’ plush.

The proofreader’s job is narrow  
The weary say “Why should I care  
About snotballs of tar on the door here  
Creases of rust over there?”  
But oh! If the paint job’s neglected  
The whole thing will look like a mess  
Stray commas pock bodies like acne  
And threaten to rot out the rest.

Why strain your elbows on hood chrome  
If the pistons stick, mired in glue?  
No profit in setting the carb right  
If the drive shaft is broken in two.  
So when you’re at Ed’s contemplating  
How to triage repairs on your wreck  
Start with the frame and the engine  
Don’t waste your polish on dreck.

— Brock Dethier
I particularly like the last stanza of this poem. The notion of being able to triage revision appeals to me, and like Brock, I believe in revising the big stuff first.

\textit{Why strain your elbows on hood chrome}
\textit{If the pistons stick, mired in glue?}

I try to teach my students how to re-think their drafts before they start re-writing them, and along with other instructors who believe that writing is a process, discourage them from spending time editing until a draft has been revised. The first stanza of Brock's poem makes it clear that he believes revision is hard work, and does involve re-thinking:

\textit{Revision is body work, overhaul}
\textit{Ratcheting straight the frame}
\textit{Replacing whole systems and panels}
\textit{Rummaging heaps of the maimed.}
\textit{With blowtorch and old rubber hammer}
\textit{Pound and pull, bend, use your 'bar}
\textit{Salvage takes sweat, but it pays well}
\textit{(Though never rule out a new car).}

Revision may involve a complete overhaul, the replacement of whole systems or panels. It takes sweat. You may even have to abandon your wreck, and start all over again. When he compares the work of revision to something as tangible as autobody work, Brock seems to share my faith as a teacher that writing is a teachable craft.

But he described the second of the two poems he brought to that first meeting he attended as one of the "most intensely personal, important poems that I've written, and that I've presented to people," a poem that he "felt uptight about." It's harder to take a business-like approach to the revision of a piece of writing like that, especially if it's a new kind of writing, and being shared with a new group of people.
“Everybody said ‘oh, we have enough time; let’s do it,’” Brock told me, “and then I got this really strong positive reaction, probably the strongest positive reaction yet that I’ve gotten to that poem, which is really serious and heavy.” It was particularly important to Brock that Don liked this “serious” poem he brought to that first meeting; he worried, he told me “what does Don think?” Don, however liked it, and the two of them talked more about the poem as they shared the ride home.

“So I left that going ‘Wow!’” Brock told me. “People took me seriously! They liked it!” Although Brock’s workman-like attitude towards most of his writing, he got something much more important than suggestions for revision from the poetry group that first time he joined in. He didn’t need help with the revising of the poem; instead, he needed it taken “seriously,” received as a “real” poem. He needed, really, to revise his view of himself as a poet.

**Enacting the Audience: “A Whole Crazy Scene”**

Later, Brock told me what the serious poem he shared when he first met with our group was about: “the central trauma of my childhood, when my little sister fell off the basement stairs onto the cellar floor and cracked her head open and almost died. And I, my brother, and my mother all feel like we were individually responsible.” This is a reoccurring theme in Brock’s writing; he comes back again and again to this subject, he told me, and it’s “something that I’ve written a play, and two or three short stories, and all sorts of stuff about.” He “never felt anywhere near as satisfied with” his descriptions of the event, until he wrote the poem, but happily, he is
satisfied with the poem. "It gets it," he told me, "in fifteen lines. It captures the whole thing." Perhaps that success is one of the things which has inspired Brock to keep trying his hand at his newest kind of writing; certainly it helps him remain sympathetic to the other poets in the group as we attempt to use the writing of poems to make meaning in our lives.

When Don read us his poem *Military History*, he returned to one of his own big themes; his experiences in the war appear in his poems, novels, columns, and even his textbooks. He introduced his poem with an apology, technically illegal in our group – we encourage one another not to apologize for a poem before it’s read. But this apology wasn’t for the quality of the poem; it was for the subject matter. Earlier in the day an editor at the *Boston Globe*, for whom he writes a weekly column, had suggested he was doing “too much with the war.”

“I hope you people will tell me if you want me to get off the war,” Don told us. “Each week I intend to write a poem about something else, but I find myself going back to it over and over. Don’t feel inhibited to say, ‘Hey, I’m bored with this war.’”

*Military History*

*One night, near the end of our war,*  
*Joe from Chicago and I see a U.S. tank*  
*waddling toward the Rhine, camouflage netting*  
*fat with food, and we steal a number ten*  
*can of pitted cherries, cut it open*  
*with my bayonet, eat the whole fucking can,*  
*sitting crosslegged, huddled over it,*  
*sharing not one fucking cherry, glopping*  
*them up with our fingers, cutting our hands*  
*on the jagged opening, juice dripping*  
*down our sleeves, while the Germans*  
*fired rockets at us for the first time,*  
*rainbows of white light as we shit*  
*our cherries, find a German dugout,*  
*shove back the emplacement cover,*  
*big as a barn door, foot of dirt on top,*
no bodies inside, tug the door over us
so black there was no up, no down,
and we sleep until the Germans attack,
bullets zinging around in the dark,
burning where they hit. We attack.
Bayonets, M-ones, fists pummeling
the enemy until we realize we're
the enemy, shove back the roof
like it weighs nothing, explode
out of there to the squad's jeers
until the wasps swarm over them.
Sweetest cherries I ever ate.

— Donald M. Murray

Don leaned forward on Ruth's blue sofa, poem in hand, to read the
newest slice of war rendered. I found myself also leaning forward; Ruth's
living room is large, but our circle seemed to move inward as if to catch all
of the poem. The rocking chair Grace sat in creaked gently, in counter-
point to the rush of the poem, which Don read fast, and towards the end,
faster.

As Don finished reading, I couldn't help but chuckle at the last line,
and Ruth cried, "That's wonderful!"

"Who are the wasps swarming over? The squad?" Grace asked.

...shove back the roof
like it weighs nothing, explode
out of there to the squad's jeers
until the wasps swarm over them.

Don answered: "Yeah, the other soldiers. I'm not sure squad works."

Brock asked another question about the wasps. "Is there any reason
or meaning or preparation for the wasps, or are the wasps just another
piece of insanity that happens to descend at this moment?"
"No," Don answered. "It's just that wasps get in those places. You're sleeping at the front lines; you don't think anything will sting you. It was wild."

Grace's question seemed to be an attempt to clarify the events described in the poem, but Brock's was different; he was asking where do those events fit into the meaning of the poem. The absurdity of the wasps seems to be important. Don didn't address where the wasps fit into what he sees as the meaning of the poem at that point in the conversation; in fact, he answered Brock's either/or question -- are the wasps there for a reason, or are they part of the general craziness? -- with a "no." But later it's clear from what he does say about his intentions for the poem that Brock, by calling the wasps "another piece of insanity," has come very close to understanding those intentions. Maybe that's why Don said no; both of Brock's options are correct. The wasps are in the poem for a reason, and the reason is to demonstrate the insanity of the situation. Don's first explicit comment about the craziness of the scene in the poem came later, just after Grace asked him how they could lose the cherries so soon after eating them.

sharing not one fucking cherry, glopping them up with our fingers, cutting our hands on the jagged opening, juice dripping down our sleeves, while the Germans fired rockets at us for the first time, rainbows of white light as we shit our cherries, find a German dugout,

This, Don told us, is "how it is." He explained in detail: "If you haven't eaten anything like this -- this is probably the beginning of March, or April, and you haven't eaten anything rich since December -- it doesn't
take long to make its way from one end to the other. Particularly if you
gorge yourself with an obscene amount of it."

"Okay," Grace conceded.

"But maybe I need to..." Don said, trailing off in the middle of his
sentence thoughtfully. "I wondered if you'd get that. Because when you did
get rich food..." He started to explain again, but Grace stopped him,
nodding her understanding. When he continued, though, he gave us an
insight into what he was trying to do in the poem: "I wanted to get, maybe,
you know, there was a whole crazy scene here."

Later, Brock suggested that since the events in the poem, though
bizarre, are small, everyday events, and Don has written his earlier drafts
in his daybook, "Maybe you could identify it as a diary entry." But, in that
case, Don pointed out that the intended irony in his title would be completely
lost. When you think of a military history, you envision a huge, dusty tome,
that outlines the movements of masses of men. But this is the real history,
Don reminded us. His story of the war consists of the little everyday actions,
small events, that go to make up the whole.

Although Brock had missed the tension between the story and its
title, he had come closer to identifying Don's intentions than the rest of us.
In fact, the discussion of the poem seemed, at times that evening, to be
another crazy scene, made up of a series of misunderstandings, mostly
about those wasps, which we returned to again and again. Grace, for
example, had a very difficult time understanding that the wasps were
literally wasps, and not Germans.

and we sleep until the Germans attack,
bullets zinging around in the dark,
burning where they hit. We attack.
Bayonets, M-ones, fists pummeling
the enemy until we realize we're
"Are they zinging around in the dark?" Grace asked, at one point. "Because if you're in a dug-out with a barn door over you head...you're in the dark, because you're basically underground."

"Yes," Don nodded.

"But are you zinging around in the dark not in the dugout, but outside?" Grace continued. She apparently didn't realize that the *bullets zinging around in the dark* are only imagined by the people in the poem, and that it is wasps in the dugout.

"Well, I can hear this is confusing," Don said. "What the situation is, is we were sound asleep, fallen into this kind of desperate sleep, and then when something starts, you don't know where you are. So you're, in the poem, you're with the people and there's no up, no down. Darkness. But you know you're in a war zone."

"But the bullets are zinging around above you?" Grace asked.

Drew leaned forward in his chair, speaking quickly. "No. No. No."

"They aren't bullets; they're wasps," Don said.

Drew added a succinct explanation: "Because they've been in the war so long that as the wasps attack them, they think there are German soldiers, so that, inside the dugout with the door shut and the wasps..."

"Oh," Grace exclaimed. "I didn't get that at all!"

Don seemed relieved the matter is cleared up. "Yeah. That's good for me to know," he said.

"And they're dead asleep," Drew continued, to Grace.

"Oh. You were in the dugout...," Grace said.
“Yes,” Don admitted.

“...and the wasps were in there...”

“Yes.”

“... and you jump out of there and everybody’s laughing at you ...”

“Yes.”

“...until the wasps that were all over you, are all over...” Grace smiled, triumphantly.

“That’s right,” Don said.

Abruptly, Grace, having finally reached an understanding about what is happening at the end of the poem, offered a suggestion about how it could be made clearer: “Oh. Okay,” she said. “I think you have to take out the Germans.”

I disagreed strongly. If there are no Germans in the poem, I thought to myself, then there is no danger, and you need the sense of danger; was she really suggesting taking all the Germans out of the story? But even more than I disagreed with Grace’s suggestion, I was startled by the abrupt way she made it. I looked from her to the poem in my hand, and back again, but she was concentrating on the text and didn’t look up; apparently she didn’t realize that she had just thrown a discordant note into the discussion.

The way Grace made the suggestion was startling because, even though she tempered it with the introductory “I think,” Grace phrased it as a necessity: “...you have to take out the Germans.” She was being far more assertive with her suggestion for change than we usually are. We try to maintain the impression that a suggestion is just that, only a suggestion. This emphasizes the poet’s ownership of the poem: none of the revision ideas we come up with can be anything but suggestions, as we are not the
ones with the ultimate authority to make changes in the text. And when Grace implied that the deletion of the Germans was a necessity, she also seemed to be ignoring another implicit rule of the group: there's no one right way to revise a poem, so we are not trying to arrive at consensus about how it has to be done. Of course, we may each, individually, believe that our interpretation is the right one, and that our suggestions are the best. But we try hard to maintain the impression that we are all collaborating together to identify what may need work. We try to act as if we are not feeling competitive, as if everyone's response is equally useful or valid.

A little later in our discussion, Brock explained how he had understood the actions of Military History chronologically, telling the story of what happened to him as he heard it: "Until you started talking about the wasps, I had read the attack wrong. I was thinking that your buddies had attacked, thinking that you were the Germans, that there was a real attack." He is describing the same confusion that Grace enacted, but he is doing it after that fact. As he explains what he was thinking when he heard the poem, he is reenacting a reading so that Don will understand where exactly his readers might get lost.

Brock feels that it is important to provide this kind of blow-by-blow of his own reading, because the poet needs as many reactions to the poem as we can give him. "What I've often found myself doing in a large group," he explained to me later, "is listening to four or five other people's reactions, and then changing my reactions, or somehow, maybe censoring myself because everybody else is saying the same things, and I disagree, or I start to see what other people have seen, and realize that I was a dummy. And I think that's maybe a disservice to the writer, when I do that, because a lot of the readers that anybody's going to get are dummies. And if
everybody else is getting something, and I didn’t get it, well, chances are
that other people reading it are not going to get it, and the writer needs to
hear that.” In this case, he wasn’t the only one that didn’t “get it” – the
central surprise of the poem confused most of us. But unlike Grace, he
stopped at explaining his confusion, and didn’t suggest a change.

“Now that ...we’re thinking wasps, it works perfectly,” he added,
after he explained his initial reaction to *Military History.* “But I’m not
saying to change anything.”

It might be said that we have a repertoire of ways to respond to poem,
or a set of scripts. The scripts many of us have learned in graduate creative
workshops emphasize the integrity of the text over the intentions of the
author. Other scripts, inherited from writing process pedagogy and
expressivist schools of thought, emphasize the intentions of the author.
Because we have both ways of responding in our repertoire, though, we are
able to smooth over, sometimes without even consciously realizing we are
doing so, disharmonies or tensions in the group by switching from one
script to another. Brock was able to do this, in this instance, by moving
away from Grace’s direct critique of the poem.

Grace is also adept at explaining her experience with the poem, as
she demonstrated later, when she wondered if maybe all the weapons in
that section confused things. “I took out the grenades,” Don said quietly. We
all laughed. The dugout was confusing enough, what with bullet-wasps,
bayonets, M-ones, fists pummeling! Imagine grenades.

“The M-1...I thought it was a rifle,” Grace insisted, “so I thought you
were firing at each other. That you had actually gotten to the point of
firing...”

“You could...,” Don started.
“You would kill each other,” Grace said.

“You could.” There was sober silence as we realized the implications of the events in the poem could have been much worse.

“I’ve been in a barn where a guy was shooting at rats with a 45,” Don continued. “You sleep with your, with your piece...”

“I always sleep with my piece.” Brock tried to lighten the mood. If we move too far into our feelings of horror at the situation Don described, it might be difficult to continue to respond to the poem as a text that we are working on – we want to respond honestly to the poem, but at the same time, we want to revise it. These goals sometimes conflict. The slightly off-color joke, truly an aside, as it moves away from the mood of the conversation as well as out of Don’s explanation, is an example of a role that Brock often plays, the clown who provides transitions in our conversations, covers over the rough spots, and even distracts us from possible conflicts which might detract from the harmony in the group.

We all laughed at Brock’s joke, even Don. But Don continued, nonetheless, to explain the context of his story.

“You sleep with your hand on your rifle. And you have hand grenades hanging on you, and you have knives...You’re at war.....so that when you’re asleep and wake up, it's pretty dangerous...I've been around where people blew up, because they pulled their hand grenades. You'd usually have four or five hand grenades, in my pockets. And it's very dangerous. I mean, hand grenades, all you do is knock that pin out, so that’s...”

“But in the context of trying to make it clear what’s going on in that poem,” Grace interrupted, “maybe using a rifle...makes it harder to understand that you’re in that hole...” She is trying another tactic to get us
to focus on the text. The readers of a poem are interested in the internal consistency of the poem, and in fact, our discussions of poems are often working towards negotiating that internal consistency. So we make our own claims, as readers, on the poem. We are invested in finding an interpretation of the poem that makes sense to us.

In this case, there is a conflict between the autobiographical nature of this poem and the group's desire to make the poem stand on its own, outside the history (Murray's history, his story.) Don is very aware of this type of tension. “This is very helpful,” he said to us, near the end of the discussion. “As I say, this is totally autobiographical. You can't put in a lot of footnotes. It's good to know what you don't know.”

Often, respondents will emphasize their lack of ownership by denigrating or downplaying their suggestions. For example, they might introduce a comment with, “Maybe that's just a stupid reading. I didn't understand...” This not only tells the group that they are going to explain their experience of the poem, in this case a lack of understanding, but signals their understanding that it is the poet who is supposed to be the expert on the poem. For example, when I couldn't get a clear picture of the tins of food hanging in the netting on a tank, I said to Don, “I have a little tiny question.”

In this case, though, Don came right back at me with a comment that emphasized my authority: “Those are the ones that scare me,” he said. “The whole thing comes tumbling down.” This notion that one little question can make the whole piece come tumbling down, like an arch with a faulty keystone, reminds me of something that Brock told me later, that he looks to his readers to find a “crack” in the shellac of his version of the poem, so that he can use that crack as a way back into his text. Don firmly
believes that this is a way that a reader can help him revise his poem; at the same time, however, Don and I are also playing a scene here, quite well. I am belittling my question, emphasizing Don's ultimate authority over the text, and Don is playing up the importance of my question, emphasizing his willingness to learn from his readers.

Throughout our discussion on Military History, Don answered questions about the events that inspired the poem in great detail; his responses to other comments on the poem were shorter, however. In many cases, he simply said, "Yes." When Brock asked how bullets could "burn", he didn't answer, saying only, "Yes." Brock continued, "Bullets are supposed to more than just burn," and again Don said, "Yes." And later, when Brock suggested, "It could be that you could get rid of that whole three lines, fists pummeling! the enemy until we realize we're/the enemy, shove back the roof/like it weighs nothing," he replied, "Yes." These affirmatives were not signals that Don necessarily agreed with the comments made; instead, they seemed to function as a way to let Brock know that Don heard and valued his contribution. This is Don's way of playing what he sees as the appropriate role as poet.

When he leaves the meeting, the poem becomes his again, but he gives the impression that he agrees with most everything that people suggest, ceding thorough, but very temporary, ownership of his text to the group. The group, in turn, works together to construct an understanding of the poem, as well as to demonstrate to Don how it is we are arriving at that understanding. Poets, then, have to appear grateful for the response they receive, even if they don't agree with it, and act as if they are listening carefully to suggestions. When Brock shares his poem with the group, he is particularly conscious of his responsibility to play the role of poet grateful
for response, and of the fact that his actions as poet can shape the course of
the response he receives.

Acting The Poet: "The Only Part I Like"

Perhaps because Brock is such a self-conscious as well as a
conscientious respondent, working hard to protect the poet's authority and
to interpret the responses of other group members and always ready with a
joke to smooth over the rough spots, he gets irritated at people who are less
aware of being part of a group, and therefore responsible for the group's
harmony, than he is himself. "One of my pet peeves," he told me, "is people
who seem to have no self-consciousness about the amount of time they're
taking. Actually, the fiction writing groups I was in...gradually died
because one person...[she] would just get up on a soap box and just go. ... All the stuff she had to say, at least the first five minutes, was good, and she
was a good critic, but it just got to be her class, and I just wasn't interested
in that."

"I don't understand how people like that...well, actually, I do
understand how people like that work: they mow people down, and that gets
them to the top. But how do they survive without ever waking up to what
they are doing? It takes either a whole lot of ego, or maybe the opposite of
ego, so much defensiveness, so that they can't bear to not be the center of the
conversation. But I have real trouble with that. Partly because I never know
what to do about it."

We all have to play along – if we are all to maintain the impression
that each poem deserves the same amount of attention, for example, we
each have to be vigilant about how much time is being spent on our own poem. Brock is very much aware of times when other people aren’t holding up their end of the performance, but he himself, as he readily admits, can sometimes be too vigilant about the time we spend on his poems. “I’m sort of the opposite. I have too much self-consciousness. I’m too ready to say, ‘Okay, that’s enough on mine; let’s go to the next.’”

There is often an awkwardness to his introductions to our discussions of his own poems. He knows that he can shape our discussion when we are responding to his own poems with just a few words before he reads. One of his shortest poems takes that shaping as its topic:

_The Poet Calls In His Own Coordinates_

“This is light,
_not worth much time,_
he says to his group.
And they,
agreeable people,
agree.

— Brock Dethier

“There’s actually a fair amount behind that,” he told me, when we talked about this little poem. “Maybe five years ago, I sat in on a small class in WSBE [the business school], because I was working with them. One of the people I was most interested in was an organizational behavior guy over there who had this sort of T-group thing, or class; I forget what it was called. We sat around for three hours and talked about the other people, and the interactions and everything. And he came up with that metaphor, which I assume is sort of a cliche in the organizational behavior circles. He said I always did that to myself. I would say, you know, well, like that,” he
said, pointing to the poem. "This isn't something worth paying attention to, but I'll talk about it anyway."

"It is sort of scary to me the way that you can frame people's responses by the way you start off something," he admitted.

It might seem that a strong awareness of the ways people in a group negotiate, such as Brock has, could lead to a kind of cynicism about the response received from the group. If people work too hard to maintain a sense of harmony, always respecting the poet's intentions, as well as his feelings, perhaps their response will be less honest. Brock feels, though, that our group can be supportive without that supportiveness becoming "pro forma": "A major thing that keeps me going [to the group] is that it is both supportive, but not mindlessly so," he says. "It's reasonable easy to get support: 'Oh, yeah, that's nice.' But it doesn't mean anything. But when one week, a certain person will clearly not be enthusiastic about a certain poem, and then the next week, say 'gee, I really like that line' then you know that it's real."

"It's what keeps me writing the next week, because I know there are people out there who will look for the seriousness of the message and of the attempt."

"Even after you tell us it's light?" I asked.

"Well, that takes something special, to see through that kind of undermining, and say, 'I don't care what you say, this is a serious poem.'"

He was obviously disappointed in our inability to do that when he wrote The Poet Calls In His Own Coordinates. Apologizing before you read, he told me, seems to be "sort of endemic to the profession - a lot of us do that." But perhaps there are ways to make a kind of formal bow, an apology that recognizes the required humble poet stance without undermining the
response. "I notice, especially, Don starting off, and he'll sort of mock himself, say 'well, I've got five minutes worth of apologies for this but I won't...."

But though Brock realizes that perhaps sometimes he goes overboard with the undermining, he commented that his wife told him that writing the little poem was probably "a healthy response to that moment": "Rather than sitting around brooding about it, put it in some form where you can laugh about it, and say this is sort of absurd," he explained. "It's one of those lessons you learn, three hundred times in your life, I think, and this is the 250th time. But I'm hoping that now that I have a metaphor for it, supplied by the guy from WSBE, and I've got it in writing, and I've got a particularly good instance, that I might remember it better or longer than last time. And I think that's really valuable for me, whether or not it has anything to do with *poetry*, it's useful for our life."

Perhaps the 249th time Brock learned this lesson was in May, when he introduced his poem *Holding the Bow*. "We can do this really quickly," he announced. "I should tell you that this was a response to an assignment I gave my critical *analysis* class, where everyone was supposed to write a poem that had something to do with a small triumph of old age, my goal being to give them the William Carlos Williams poem about that. So then we all, anonymously, put our poems in and everybody read them all, mine and Williams's included, with no names on them, and then we voted for the best three. There were a hundred and ten votes, or something like that, between forty people in the class. Williams beat me by one. I got two votes, he got three." We laughed. Loudly. This was an amusing variant on the humble poet stance, because it included the well-respected Williams.
“So I felt pretty good about that,” Brock continued. “The fact that neither of us came anywhere close to winning the votes in the class is...” he paused dramatically, then continued, “...an issue that we’re not going to go into.” We laughed again.

“Anyway...,” Brock said, and read us his poem about a “small triumph of old age.”

**Holding the Bow**

It always began with the bow:  
the cock of the arm  
the intake of breath  
focus  
the fingers rounded  
tips bowing black ovals  
into melody.

At 89 a slingcocked her arm;  
her fingertips lost their callous  
for the first time since 1912.  
The only violins in her life  
serenaded the soaps.

Two days after they took the cast off  
she finally opened the case.  
Her fingers trembled to the bow  
and she held it up to the window  
to see it in the winter light.

— Brock Dethier

“It feels like you’ve given us enough focus with the intake of breath,” Drew said.

It always began with the bow:  
the cock of the arm  
the intake of breath  
focus

“You don’t need focus?” Brock asked him, clarifying what Drew was actually suggesting.
“No,” Drew answered.

“Okay,” Brock said.

“And also I’d leave out the in fingers rounded,” Drew added, “so it’s just:

\begin{verbatim}
 the intake of breath
 fingers rounded
 tips bowing black ovals
\end{verbatim}

After a bit of a pause, while Brock was nodding and we were all looking at the copies in our hands, I said to Brock, “The end is very lovely.” Several others seconded my compliment, nodding, and Don said, emphatically, “Yes.” The end of the poem is quiet, understated, and full of sounds and images that draw out the picture of the woman holding her bow up, her small triumph.

\begin{verbatim}
 Her fingers trembled to the bow
 and she held it up to the window
 to see it in the winter light.
\end{verbatim}

“Yes,” Brock said in response to our compliment, “it’s the only part I like, I think.”

“Well, the rest is good, too, but the end is very lovely!” I quickly told him, laughing a little. It wasn’t clear if Brock was trying to down-play the compliment, or was really that unsure of the rest of his poem, but I wanted to make it immediately clear that I had not meant to say that the rest of the poem was less lovely, by contrast to the end. Everyone else laughed at my assertion, too, as if they too recognized Brock’s habit of denigrating his own poems, and wanted to assure him it wasn’t necessary here.

After a pause, Don moved us back to a more business-like tone. “The weakest spot for me,” he said, “is the serenaded the soaps – it didn’t seem to fit the person at all.”
The only violins in her life
serenaded the soaps.

Brock said, “Hmm,” rather noncommittally.

“Now, you may know the person,” Don continued, “who it is, or
something. But it seemed totally contradictory.”

“Yes,” Drew seconded Don’s thoughts. “I didn’t know whether it fit
the person or not, but it took me out of the whole scene which was so
genuine and loving, and really visually beautiful, and the soaps are so
ugly.” Hildred and Ruth nodded and murmured yes.

“Yes,” Brock said. “Well. I wanted that contrast. It’s supposed to be
quite a bring-down, you know?”

Brock was clear about his intentions for the line about the soap
operas, and he did, after a pause, speak up in defense of keeping the lines.
Brock told me later that he was taught to keep quiet while groups discussed
his writing: “I was brought up that that was the appropriate way for the
author to act, and I still think it’s true. Because as soon as you start saying,
no, I intended that, or even asking questions, you lose, I think one of the
most valuable things: the immediate, uncensored, unchanneled reactions.”
But though he tries very hard, sometimes he can’t quite succeed. He can’t
keep quiet, here, for example, though he starts very slowly, as if trying to
phrase his objection to the suggestion carefully.

“Yes,” Drew said, immediately, recognizing Brock’s intent.

“But I think that’s implied,” Ruth objected, and then explained
further: “That’s implied, with her dignity and everything. It just seemed
like an aside remark to me, and then I had to get back to it.”
“Um, hmm. Okay.” Brock nodded, not acquiescence, but willingness to listen to the suggestion. Four out of the six of us who were responding to the poem had voiced opposition to soaps, so I knew he would consider it seriously when he went back to revise, but at the moment, he wasn’t agreeing, he was simply signalling that he was listening.

“Even if it wasn’t the soaps,” Drew went on, “even if the only violins in her life came out of the television, or something. I could get it, I could go all the way down into the soaps.”

“Yes, it’s the soaps,” Don agreed, pinpointing the exact word which was causing the negative reaction.

“Yes,” Drew nodded. Brock didn’t say anything. There was a silence.

“I would suggest a different title,” Don said, “only because you’ve got one apparently stupid reader, over here, who read this as a bow and arrow.”

“I did too,” I said, relieved that I wasn’t the only one who had struggled with that on first hearing the poem. “And it really bothered me,” I said, “because I had to really think what the black ovals were,” explaining where I’d gotten stuck. The black ovals had been the clue, for me, that it was a violin we were talking about.

“I immediately thought it was violins,” Hildred put in.

“I thought it was a bow and arrow,” Ruth said.

“Well, if you’ve got three of us who thought…” Don started, and then defended our reading of the title. “You can read it like that, except for the soaps business, as a bow and arrow. It works beautifully, too, if she was on old bounty-hunter, or something.”

“I was afraid people would read it as holding the bow,” Brock said, pronouncing bow as in bowing to the crowd. Everyone laughed. “Which
doesn’t make quite as much sense,” he continued, “but the words work. Get
down into that bow and just stay there.”

“Or refusing to bow,” said Don, “in a dance.”

“Or a poem about seasickness?” Hildred suggested.

Now we were laughing hard.

“It’s a beautiful, it’s interesting, actually,” Don said, “it works
remarkably well. It’s a beautiful thing: the craft, or the person’s dedication
to the craft, would come through either way. I’m more sympathetic to the
violin than the bow and arrow, but still it’s amazing.”

“I see where you could make a case for the bow and arrow,” Hildred
said, thoughtfully.

Ruth and I agreed.

“But you wouldn’t...?” Brock asked.

“But you wouldn’t get a melody,” I said, pointing out what you would
lose if you tried to read the poem as the story of an archer.

\begin{verse}
tips bowing black ovals
into melody.
\end{verse}

Despite all the laughter during this discussion, we do take Brock’s
poetry seriously, even when he doesn’t seem ready to himself. We found
several new ways to look at his poem \textit{Holding the Bow}, and obviously
recognized the beauty and importance of its theme, which Don described as
a “person’s dedication to the craft.” Brock obviously feels some tensions
around the question of what “serious” poetry is, and what it means to take
oneself seriously as a poet, but he does believe that the group can show him
a new way to look at his poem.
Taking It Seriously

At the beginning of the first meeting after Brock had written The Poet Calls In His Own Coordinates, he asked me to remind him to give me a copy. He went on to tell me and Amy, the only two people who had made it to this late-summer meeting at his house, that it was about "my habit of undermining the seriousness of what I am doing."

"I start off saying something like, oh, this is a light poem," he said, "we can get through it quickly. That's a lifelong habit, and people respond by saying, oh yeah, that's light."

"And then they treat it lightly, and you don't want them to treat it lightly," I commiserated.

"You know, I felt badly about that night, too," Amy added, about the night we had discussed Victory Dance. It was the response to that poem which had prompted Brock to write The Poet Calls In His Own Coordinates. "It was my first time there, and I was working very hard to cue in and pick up things, and by the time we got to your piece, I was so tired that I wasn't able to bring as much to it as I think it deserved. It wasn't just you discounting, I think maybe several of us were kind of tuckered out."

After we had passed around our poems, an easier task than usual with only the three of us in attendance, Brock, as host, went first, and this time he was careful about the way he introduced his poem. "This is not a light one. How about that for an intro?" he asked, chuckling.

"Good job," I told him, "good job!"

Ghostwriter

Yes, I write for ghosts,
phonevoice ghosts,
ghosts whose typed names
undermine their signatures,
ghosts I would not recognize
though my name’s in their acknowledgements.

I write about ghosts:
the perfectly informed consumer,
the enlightened CEO,
the benevolent monopoly,
the system that works.

I write to ghosts:
eager and expectant managers,
business 401 students who care,
an information-hungry electorate,
sensate editors.

I write as a ghost,
voiceless, nameless.
You could put your hand through me
or blow me off like attic dust.

I want to bleed
tetanus blood
from rust spikes
on the pier,
make people sob or squirm.

I want to rip
white guts
from the belly
of a shark,
leave you keening, delirious.

I want to write
pain passion
and prurient lust:
the feel of her lips in the woods

the rush of the drug
the roll of the rock
the cracks in my heart
the piles in my ass
the feel of the Fiat
on its side on I-80
the dark side of my days when she didn’t write back.

But I need more lightbulbs.

My acquaintances squint at my name.
My blood evaporates before hitting the ground.
No one bothers to open my mail.

My ink comes out dusty and thin –
self dry, self erase.
They say I'm a very good ghost
I can see it now in my own face.

— Brock Dethier

Amy asked Brock to read his poem again, asking carefully first if that was allowed in this group.

“A break of all protocol and tradition!” Brock teased her.

“If you wouldn't mind,” Amy insisted gently. “Because this is dark and I want to make sure that I am hearing it.”

This was a significant response, from Brock's point of view, since having readers recognize the seriousness of the issues addressed by a poem is important to him. He told me later that Don had often offered this kind of response: “A couple of times he's said things that were the most important thing to me in the whole meeting; both times, something like, this is really dark, this is really serious. When everyone else is taking it as being light, and he recognizes that, in fact, it’s not light at all.”

“That Lips poem [which we had read several weeks earlier] is incredibly serious,” he added, “and I don't think it's revealing enough, or successfully revealing enough, that other people can see the seriousness. But it's a big issue in my life, and it's really gratifying to have somebody recognize just its seriousness, totally irrelevant of its value as a poem, although it had to work somewhat as a poem to get that across.” The benefits of this recognition, by a reader, of the seriousness of the issue that has prompted a poem is similar, for Brock, to the benefits of therapy: “That may be the most important thing that you look for in therapy,” he told me,
“not that somebody understands you, or has the solution to your problem, but just that they see as serious the things that you see as serious.”

So Amy’s recognition that Brock’s poem about ghostwriting is “dark,” as well as complex, is valuable, although this time, of course, he’d given us a clue how we should react by announcing the poem was “not a light one.” He read the poem a second time.

The poem is quite long; even after the second reading there was a pause while we worked our way through it on the page. Amy, perhaps uncomfortable with the silence, used a strategy I often fall back on: describing the poem, assuming that description will lead to other types of response. “So it feels like it’s in two parts,” she said, and then corrected herself. “Three parts. You’ve got this prologue material, which sets up, let’s see, four kinds of ghosts, and then the real wish, and then the last part is where...” She paused. “Um...kind of the hopelessness of the real wish?”

Brock laughed. Amy’s struggle to describe the third section of the poem led her to a tremendously sad summary; he may have laughed in discomfort.

“It’s kind of like the result of what’s happened in the first section,” I added. “It’s like, this is what I do, this is what I want to do, but I can’t do it because I’ve been bled dry.”

Amy agreed.

“I love that dry ink,” I said. “I love my ink comes out dusty and thin and self dry. Even the sounds are dry there. I think because of the s’s. And the rhythm of it.”

“Yes,” Amy added, “and there’s all that internal rhyme working in there, you know: dust, erase, ghost, and face. You hear the s sounds really hiss.”
“It’s very dry. Bloodless.”

We talked about the dry imagery and sounds later in the discussion, as well, when Amy commented on the “visceral” quality of the middle section of the poem, and I said that the wet, fleshy images contrasted nicely with the dustier, drier images. During an interview, Brock told me that our identification of this contrast was “a major contribution” to his “understanding of the poem.”

“Those things are obviously there,” he said. “I suppose at some level I was consciously working on them, but I did not think in those terms when I was writing it. I thought of it more in visual terms, seeing versus invisibility. But when you start playing around with it, [I thought] ‘oh, yeah, that’s good, I like that!’ And it works, the dusty going along with the visibility. That’s a nice pair.”

By the time I finished describing the dry sounds in the first section of the poem, Amy had begun to identify what it was in the poem that made her feel it was a “dark” poem. “I think,” she said, “as a writer, this scares the living shit out of me. Because I can see that this would happen. Here you would be, a writer, but it would be the worst kind of anonymity. Because, if I understand the focus of the poem, you’d write all these other things that are nameless.”

Again, Brock told me later that he was particularly pleased that both Amy and I thought that this poem was frightening. “The thing that sticks in my mind,” he told me, when I asked him about our response to the poem, “was you both expressing a sort of fear, or being appalled...I had thought of that as a response I wanted to get, but it was kind of a gratifying response. That’s one of the ways I feel about [ghostwriting].”
We continued to talk about the poem for some time; since there were only the three of us that evening, everyone's poem got lots of attention. We discussed whether or not there were enough specifics in the fourth stanza; Amy felt that it had fewer concrete images than the other stanzas in that section, although I pointed out that “attic dust” was fairly specific.

\[
\text{write as a ghost,} \\
\text{voiceless, nameless.} \\
\text{You could put your hand through me} \\
\text{or blow me off like attic dust.}
\]

Amy suggested moving the stanza into the third part of the poem, but Brock replied that would ruin the scheme in the beginning of the poem.

\[
\text{Yes, I write for ghosts...} \\
\text{I write about ghosts...} \\
\text{I write to ghosts...} \\
\text{I write as a ghost...}
\]

Brock had questions about the word “acknowledgements,” which he felt was too business-like or perhaps “unpoetic,” and about the image of the light bulbs, which was an allusion neither Amy nor I recognized to the invisible man in Ralph Ellison’s novel. Amy suggested cutting the last couplet of the poem, because she liked the “sense of emptiness” she got from the line which ended self-erase.

\[
\text{My ink comes out dusty and thin –} \\
\text{self dry, self erase.} \\
\text{They say I'm a very good ghost} \\
\text{I can see it now in my own face.}
\]

Brock said he would “play with it,” but didn’t sound enthusiastic about dropping the couplet. Amy almost immediately conceded: “You may be right.”
At the end of the discussion, we discovered that, although Amy felt great sympathy for the narrator, she didn’t realize that she could also extend her sympathy to Brock, who had actually been a ghostwriter for some time, and who was writing the poem out of his own experiences. After we had finished discussing the poem, she asked Brock, almost as an afterthought, “Do you ghostwrite?”

“All true!” he answered.

“That makes it scarier!” Amy exclaimed.

Brock told her thoughtfully that he had not reached the “level of poetic sophistication” where he could invent a persona for his narrator. In fact, Brock believes that most writing, including poems, is based on personal experience. He attributes this, partially, to a class he took as a freshman in college, where, unlike in my first writing seminar, there was a great emphasis on expressing oneself and writing from personal experience. “At Stanford,” he told me, “where I placed out of their Freshman English but you had to do some kind of Freshman seminar instead, I chose Writing and the Uses of Experience, where the guy turned out to be the ultimate hippy, a friend of Ken Kesey, and the Dead and everything, and we’d go over to his house and sit on tie-dyed pillows.” The emphasis on the importance of expressing one’s true experience seems to have made a sound impression on him right away and is reflected in other stories he tells about himself as a young writer. “One poem that I wrote about me,” he told me, “when I was nineteen, was called Old Too Soon about my feeling that I was too grown up and cautious and organized. I was a good boy, but I wanted to go off and be wild and not responsible – I should try writing about that again!”

I nodded, thinking maybe it was partly his grown-up cautiousness that had put him in the habit of taking so much responsibility in group
situations, a habit which makes him a wonderful respondent, but perhaps causes him more difficulties than necessary when we talk about his poems. “I remember really being hurt that the teacher didn’t like it,” he continued. “Because he liked my fiction, he was a good guy — but he didn’t like it at all. And I thought, this is the essence of me, this isn’t bullshit, this is true.”

Amy, on the other hand, had been working on a long series of “persona poems” the summer she joined our group, based on oral history work she had done back home in Michigan. She had reached what Brock called the “level of poetic sophistication” where she could write poems entirely from another’s point of view. I suspect, though, that there are several members of the poetry group who would claim that, however sophisticated, this kind of work is simply not what we are generally interested in working on. Many of us agree with Brock: real poetry comes from the soul. Real poetry is authentic.

But there are a lot of things we generally don’t say about poems when we respond to them. Although we sometimes assume, as we did with Jim’s poem Nowadays, that the narrator of the poem and the poet are one and the same, we generally don’t try to solve that narrator’s problems, or ask the poet for more information about his life to clarify the poem. We usually don’t play the comforting friend, expressing grief or sympathy, even when the poem is about the death of someone close to the poet. We talk about poems, not people or feelings, and by doing so, we seem to be assuming it’s possible to look at those as separate. It may be that in order to look at a poem as something that can be revised we have to make this assumption. The idea of revision being a business-like craft, which we can help the writer with, conflicts with the idea that the poem springs from the poet’s soul and is an expression of his individual life.
Brock tells me that he expects different types of response from
different individuals in the group, and that "just a little bit of history" with a
respondent predisposes him to receive response in different ways. For
example, he describes his reaction to one woman this way: "If she says
something, I'll think of it as a stylistic suggestion, or a way to improve the
poem, but I don't think she's ever said something to me that really made
me feel like she and I were connecting as individual people, not as writers
- I mean we connect as writers." He contrasts this with the way he
connects with another respondent: "he doesn't phrase [his response] in
terms of you as an individual, but I hear it [that way.] He is connecting with
me as an individual human being. And that's really important." He seems
to value both types of response, but especially the more human.

Brock takes a craftsman's attitude towards the revision of prose - you
can tell from the exercises he's written, as well as from his pedagogical
poems, and the way he talks about writing. When he's writing, or talking
about prose, Brock defines "revision" to include re-thinking, or
reconceptualizing, but he seems a little less sure when it comes to poetry.
His ambivalence, which he seems to share with much of the rest of the
group, is clear when he describes just what he's up to when he goes to the
poetry group: "What I'm doing there is not - well, probably it's about
writing as a craft, and writing as professional and all that kind of stuff -
but it's also a chance to communicate things that are really important to
me and that are tough to talk about unless I really have time to boil them
down and get them right, to people that I feel good about, that I'm willing,
for whatever reason, to tell those things to. That's really important to me,
and at this point in my life it's extremely rare."
Responding to the Moment

The poetry group holds in common an explicit idea of what we are up to, which, as we saw in the previous chapter, is fraught with implicit contradictions and cross purposes. In order to continue to function as a group, we would either have to make a more consistent theory explicit, something which this group seems to have no intention of doing, or to negotiate around those cross purposes and conflicting assumptions on a moment by moment basis. So, part of what it means to be a skillful respondent in this group is to be able to read the social situation of the group, and the group’s conversation, as it is being created, and decide how to respond in each specific instance. Which type of response is appropriate at which moment depends on several things: how the poet feels about this particular poem, what we know about how he works, what is being said by other group members, and how the poet is reacting to those comments.

One of the major fault lines in the implicit assumptions about what we are up to is the conflict between the idea that revision is a craft we are gathering to practice together and the idea that one of the most valuable responses we can give one another is to be human readers. In the one instance, we provide suggestions for change, but in the other we react instead of rewriting, acting as one human being listening to the authentic expression of another. Each action can be considered part of a script; the respondent is playing a different role in each case. It may be a role which the respondent carries throughout the whole discussion of a poem – Grace, for example, plays the role of objective critic as she struggles to revise Don’s poem Military History so that it has meaning separate from Don’s autobiography. But skillful respondents in the group may also have to
switch between scripts – responding with the analysis of a text-oriented critic one moment, with the experiential description of a reader the next moment, and perhaps with what Brock calls the “human response” the next.

Brock clearly is a skillful respondent, who is able to read poem, poet, and social situation. He is also extremely sensitive to his responsibility to do so. Although he is unsure of his abilities as a critic of poetry, he has an extensive repertoire of ways to respond in our group, ways of responding that seem to come from many sources, including his teaching, his experiences in fiction writing workshops, and his exposure to the idea of authentic expression as a freshman. We are lucky that he also finds the poetry group rewarding: a place to learn more about poetry, to communicate what is important to him, and to develop relationships with people he feels make good mentors, good respondents, and good listeners.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE USEFULNESS OF RESPONSE

One evening in late June, when in New Hampshire tulips are long gone but the summer flowers are just hitting their short, glorious peak, we met at a farmhouse surrounded by flower beds riotous with color. One of the poems we discussed was Ralph's *Tulips*, which harkened back to the equally colorful spring bulbs.

*Tulips*

Swatch of red tulips,  
brilliant and blood-hued,  
really an unreasonable red,  
blooming by a white fence  
in somebody's front yard  
and I want to study them,  
want to sit cross-legged  
watching hour upon hour  
until the arrival of dusk  
when each set of petals  
folds into chaste points,  
want to observe carefully  
how they cradle the twilight  
or squeeze the darkness,  
want to bury my nose  
in each velvety bowl,  
want to drink mint juleps  
from Rembrandt tulips,  
want to put my heavy arms  
gently oh gently around  
soft fluted shoulders  
and whisper:

"In a matter of weeks  
you will wither and die  
but I will never forget  
how you stood on this day —  
six ruby goblets  
empty of everything"
but common light and raw spring air."

- Ralph Fletcher

Brock was the first to mention the two lines that seemed to several people a mismatch with the rest of the poem. "The only thing I'm not sure about was the juleps," he said.

\begin{quote}
want to drink mint juleps
from Rembrandt tulips...
\end{quote}

"I had trouble with the same thing," said Amy. Although this was her first meeting, she did not seem reluctant to join right in with the conversation. "It's almost too much charm," she continued.

Although no one immediately answered Amy's comment, the mint juleps did come up again and again during our discussion. But first, several people pointed out what they liked about the poem.

"It seems like the unreasonable red, really unreasonable red, is just perfect," Brock said. The anonymity of these tulips, in someone else's yard, was praised, and it was agreed that the white fence, which almost might have been a cliché, along with the red of the tulips, was interesting. The simplicity reminded several people of William Carlos Williams' red wheelbarrow.

"The only thing that tripped me up was the juleps and tulips," Grace said, a few minutes later.

"Most of us laughed when you read that," someone else pointed out, "with pleasure." It would probably be unreasonable to say the lines had to be cut because they made us laugh, but several faces looked doubtful, as if, perhaps, it's not an appropriate response to laugh with a poem. There was a pause in the conversation.
Then Colleen changed the subject. "I wondered about the first two lines. *Swatch of red tulips/ brilliant and blood-hued.*"

**Tulips**

*Swatch of red tulips, 
brilliant and blood-hued, 
really an unreasonable red, 
blooming by a white fence 
in somebody's front yard*

"I wondered if you made the first line be *Really an unreasonable red,*" she continued, suggesting that Ralph simply cut the first two lines. Ralph looked at her questioningly.

"I like that suggestion," Grace said.

"What would it be again?" Ralph asked.

"Have the first line be, *Really an unreasonable red,*" Colleen answered. Then she suggested putting a comma into the line, as well, reading the line out loud with a pause at the comma.

**Tulips**

*Really, an unreasonable red, 
blooming by a white fence 
in somebody's front yard...*

"Or you could do it just as it is, without the comma in the first line," someone else added. "...*Tulips. Really an unreasonable red.*"

A few minutes later, Ralph went back to the troublesome lines in the poem.

"I want to go back to the whole issue of the drinking the mint juleps, the Rembrandt tulips," he said. "First of all, the poem has a sort of an increasingly a sense of obsessiveness. Kind of like yielding to almost whimsy, almost giddiness. That's where that line comes from."
“What about cutting the Rembrandt tulips?” Colleen asked. The rhyme added to the whimsy of the lines; it might have been what tipped us over into laughter. Colleen seemed to have missed Ralph’s point, though, that he wanted the whimsical feeling the rhyme created.

“Well, Rembrandt tulips,” Ralph answered, “they are a particular kind of tulips.”

“If you really like it…” Grace started, ready to concede that Ralph didn’t have to cut the lines just because that seemed to be the consensus of the group.

I thought that was the end of the matter, but Amy surprised me several minutes later, after Don had pointed out a simple cut Ralph liked. “I was wondering,” she started. “I want to go back to juleps and tulips. There is a certain delight in the sound there. And I’m trying to think of why that’s so jarring. Part of that, I think, is what follows it: the tone changes again, after that, want to put your heavy arms gently, and it sounds more serious.”

want to drink mint juleps
from Rembrandt tulips,
want to put my heavy arms
gently oh gently around
soft fluted shoulders
and whisper:
“In a matter of weeks
you will wither and die…"

“But I was thinking,” Amy continued, apparently still trying to solve the problem. “Could you create a stronger irony if you move those lines somewhere else, or cut them? So that you go from the gaiety of wanting to drink mint juleps from Rembrandt tulips and whisper in a matter of weeks…?”
Apparently Amy felt that Ralph could get away with keeping the juleps if he cut the lines about putting his arms gently around the shoulders of the tulips. That was a surgery I wouldn't have been willing to suggest. Ralph started to say something, but stopped as she continued. “The contrast there is something you might want to play with, though, because it creates enormous tension very suddenly. Even though I love the lines about fluted shoulders.”

Again, Ralph started to say something, but then stopped. “But then your tone shifts [away from] the playfulness,” Amy concluded.

“I just thought the idea of putting your arm around somebody’s shoulders was pretty playful thing, also,” Ralph said, finally, questioning the change in tone Amy was claiming. “You know what I mean?”

\begin{verbatim}
want to put my heavy arms
gently oh gently around
soft fluted shoulders
and whisper...
\end{verbatim}

“Oh, and whispering to them!” Amy agreed.

“You still get that sense that it’s very conspiratorial, you know?”

“But I think I’d reverse the order, though,” Amy insisted. “So that your most playful lines are the lines where you get the …”

“You can’t reverse them.” I’d never heard Ralph be so abrupt. Apparently he hadn’t meant to be, because he softened it immediately. “I mean, how would you do it?” he asked.

“You’d have to drink those mint juleps before you could do it,” Brock broke in. Relieved laughter filled the room at the joke.

“You’d need about ten of them before you could do it, have the courage to do it,” Ralph said, quietly.

“Anyway, I’ll think about that. That’s not a bad idea.”
**Being Surprised**

Ralph didn't seem to feel any sense of duty about attending to the revisions the group had suggested. "You know," he explained later, "I don't feel like I'm going there to bring a sick patient that needs to be bandaged up. It's interesting. I don't go to the group with that sense that I need a lot of help. Some people do, in the group." I wondered about that. Don, in fact, told me that he knows what he will probably do with a poem before he goes into a meeting, and he often quietly rejects comments that don't fit in with the ideas he already has. He decides immediately which suggestions have merit and those are the ones he remembers; Don, unlike Ralph and me, does sit down the next morning and rewrite a poem he's received response to, and he uses the suggestions he agreed with, and, or so he tells me, ignores the rest. Certainly, that isn't the stance of someone who is asking for a lot of help from the group. Jim places more value on the interpretations he receives from the group than on the suggestions for revising that might "bandage" a "sick patient" or poem.

"I'm not trying to say that I should, or whatever. I just noticed that I don't," Ralph continued. "I kind of bring it to get some reaction. I take about a fourth of the suggestions, I think."

"What do you mean by 'take' the suggestions?" I asked him.

"Actually use them," he answered.

"When you actually revise the poem?"

"Yes."
"Do you write them down, or do you 'take' them in the sense that when you're sitting there listening to them, they sound right, so you tend to remember them?"

"I definitely don't write down as much as most people do. Like when Colleen said, 'I would start this poem, really, comma, an unreasonable red.' I don't write that down because I'm not going to do that. It doesn't make sense to me. It's not my poem."

"And you know right on the spot that you're not going to do it?"

"It's not the poem I wrote," he said, simply.

I don't find myself rejecting comments and suggestions as quickly as other members of the group describe. Ralph commented on this during our conversation. "It's very possible, Andrea, that you and I do slightly different things," he said. "I notice when you bring your poem, you let go of it, you let your child go to the day care center. You don't say anything, and you show a kind of respectfulness to other people's response, because you write down almost everything people say. And you seem genuinely interested. I don't know if you are, but you seem that way."

"Whereas I'm not as interested in some comments as others," Ralph continued. "And I tend to assert ownership over the poem early in the discussion, and talk about it. Somebody will say something about a line and I'll say, 'Yeah, that's one of the things I'm wondering about.' So I think what we do is slightly different. It's not vastly different, but I think there's a little different dynamic going on there."

Several people are more likely to "assert ownership" over a poem earlier in the discussion than I am, and others are less likely to. It may be that we bring these different tendencies into the group from other situations where we have responded to writing or heard others respond. Several group
members, for example, described groups they had participated in, usually in graduate school, which were extremely competitive, where they felt they had to defend their poems or fiction from respondents who were trying to get the professor's approval by critiquing the poem in so fierce a manner as to be practically ridiculing the author's work. In those workshops, writers, if they were allowed to participate in the discussion, would tend to defend their work; that strategy for responding to response could become a habit. Other group members developed the habit of silence, usually through participating in workshops where they waited to hear all responses before discussing the poems. But it can't be said that these habitual "dynamics" are consistent; as individuals, we don't always respond to response in the same way. Sometimes a poet who is usually a very active participant in the discussion of his poem will say nothing. Sometimes a poet who usually sits back and listens will jump in with her own comments and questions. Because we have set no explicit rules about the behavior of the poet during the discussion of the poem, we have the option of sliding from one mode to another. When we make that slide depends very much on which poem is being discussed and how the discussion is proceeding.

Ralph felt quite able to decide whether to use Colleen's suggested comma on the spot, partly because he knows the poets who are responding to his work, and recognizes that we all bring diverse skills and sensibilities to a poem. He felt that his knowledge of Colleen's "ear" for poetry made a difference in how he responded to her suggestion that he start Tulips differently.

"I have a sense also that her ear and my ear are very different ears," he told me. "I think that you find people who you feel have similar
sensibilities, or who are sympathetic to your sensibility. Then I tend to be more open to it."

That's not to say that Ralph, or Don and the other poets who told me they recognize a suggestion that matches their intentions for the poem when they hear it, aren't occasionally surprised. Ralph says that the group helps him "sift" good lines from bad.

"There's another point in the group when I'll realize sort of sheepishly that yeah, those lines can go. You really kind of go with the group to just get reaction. I mean, take the last group, where I thought that line about, I want to drink mint juleps from Rembrandt tulips. Even though it was a little bit cutesy, you know, I thought it was great thing. And the group's like 'enh.' " I smiled at the unenthusiastic noise he attributed to the group.

"I cut that. I was surprised. And after you get over the little the wincing pain of it, you're think, well, gee, that's interesting."

"If I remember correctly, there was divided opinion about that line, too," I said, reminding him that we didn't just tell him the mint juleps had to go.

"Yes, there was divided opinion. But of course, the part of you that...well, I don't know if you've got this part, but I've got a part of me that's a big fan, you know. That loved that line. That was surprised there's any dissension at all."

There seems to be a general consensus that we are "too close" to our texts, so we need the others to help us "sift" our good lines from the bad, as well as to let us know when we are holding on to parts of poems which belong to the process of writing rather than the poem itself. As Hildred put it, "You completely forget what it's like for a person who has to take this

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whole journey with you. You're sort of still going with a whole lot of thought processes that have been left out, and it's hard, especially when you've just written it, to stand back and see it.”

And sometimes, as several people pointed out to me, a respondent will surprise the poet with a suggestion that's a new idea, but obviously just right. This happened during our discussion of Tulips.

“In the sixth line,” Don said, “I would have I want to sit cross-legged. You don't need the study there. You can just say, I want to sit cross-legged.

\[ \text{and I want to study them,} \\
\text{want to sit cross-legged} \\
\text{watching hour upon hour} \\
\text{until the arrival of dusk} \]

“Just I want to sit cross-legged?” Ralph asked, looking down at his own copy of the poem.

“I want to sit cross-legged, watching hour upon hour,” Don read.

“Yes, yes, yes!” Ralph said. “You're right. I think that's good. Yep.”

Brock told me about surprising Don without actually making a suggestion. There have been several times, he told me, that “something I've said has been really valuable, and really helped him, and it won't be anything that I've directly said, you know, ‘change this,’ or ‘this doesn't work’, it will just be some random comment, or some connection that I made, that got him to think about something else, got him to see it in a new way.” Brock pointed out that our ability to change the way the poet sees the poem with seemingly random comments makes it “almost impossible to know as a critic or a reader, what will be valuable for somebody else. It's one of the things that I think makes it fun.”

As a poet, Brock appreciates the surprises the group finds in his poem. “One of the great things that I get out of the group, is people seeing
As a poet, Brock appreciates the surprises the group finds in his poem. "One of the great things that I get out of the group, is people seeing things that – well, I’m always hesitant to say ‘that I didn’t put in there,’ because it’s such a conscious and semi-conscious and unconscious act – ten minutes after I’ve been working on a poem, I couldn’t tell you exactly all the things that were going on or not going on in my head. You choose a particular image for God-knows how many different reasons, and then almost immediately those reasons disappear, and there it is, just left there. But people seeing things that I wasn’t seeing myself as a reader is really neat, and the fact that you saw that, pointed it out, and made me conscious of it, will allow me to revise it in a more conscious way and pick up on those things and emphasize them more. You know, that’s really useful."

He was working on a poem at the time we talked, which he hadn’t quite finished, but which he told me described an image he had of the usefulness of this kind of response: "Working on something by yourself for a long period of time, it’s like you put on layers of shellac over something," he said. "And you know, that’s good, it makes it polished and shiny and preserved and all that. But you realize after all a while that what you need to do is get down through those layers to what’s underneath them. And it’s really hard to do on your own. What you need is somebody else to come along and make a crack. It could be criticism, it could be a positive thing. And that makes a little crack, and you say ‘oh yeah,’ and you jiggle a little piece of it, and the crack widens. Often it’s just a word or two, or an image. That’s what I really look for, most of the time, when I give any piece of writing to somebody else, is, help me find that crack, or create it for me."
"A Poem is a Solitary Endeavor"

"I think that how assertive and aggressive you can be with somebody else’s poetry isn’t a given,” Ralph told me. “It should be built on a relationship that you have with that person. And secondly, I think that we should always try to find out what the poet has in mind.”

In general, our group is very careful not to be too aggressive or assertive with other people’s work. That’s why it took several forays into the issue of the mint juleps before we could let it drop; we were maneuvering around a sensitive issue, some of the poet’s favorite lines, and we know Ralph well enough to see that he liked those lines. It may be, as well, that one reason Amy brought the lines up again at the end of the discussion, after the rest of us had let it go, was that she, being a brand new participant, did not know Ralph well enough to recognize that he had already heard enough to come to a decision, and was no longer looking for a solution.

The poem, whether the poet holds onto it jealously, or is more willing to let it, as Ralph said, go off to day care, still belongs to the poet. Partly because of that, there is great deal of reluctance to tamper with other people’s work. Some respondents wonder if they can understand the poet’s intention well enough to be able to suggest changes that will fit.

“It’s confusing,” Hildred told me. “I think, how could I write this poem?”

“It’s hard to know how to give people feedback because it’s not a poem you would have written?” I asked her.

She nodded, and went on to explain that it seemed to her, often, that a poet’s work was so different from her own that her comments, even if she
really liked the poem at hand, would not be relevant, because she didn’t know what the poet was trying to do.

“And you think are you grafting you onto their poem,” she explained, “which just seems idiotic to me...I always find, personally, that I have a hard time. I even have a hard time writing on people’s writing.”

Don put it slightly differently: “I think that’s one of the wonderful things about the group, one of the awful things: how do you enter into...a world that is so alien to yours?”

We respect the diversity of poets in our group, and appreciate both the range of poetry and the range of response that is the result of that diversity. That’s why we are so careful to consider the poet’s intention. Ralph told me that when responding to one of Colleen’s poems, he needed to watch for “the things that make Colleen’s poetry unique.”

“I could make it into a Ralph Fletcher type of poem, but what good is that?”

Brock also mentioned the uniqueness of Colleen’s work: “I respect everybody...even though I think Colleen is off in left field somewhere, I still think there’s some possibility that her left field is really an important, worthwhile, left field.”

“One of the left fields that will define the field?” I asked.

He nodded. “And thirty years from now, people will be reading her stuff and saying, oh my god, how innovative. I think it’s important that you do think that the other people [in the group] are doing things that you think are worthwhile.”

We know one another’s work, where it is similar to our own, and where it is different. The diversity of poets in the group is counted as a strength. “It’s really amazing,” according to Brock. “The amount of variety
– no matter who’s there! You know, between you and Hildred and Ralph and Don, five or six really good poets at any one meeting, and yet they’re very different, so that’s kind of fun, and keeps expanding my sense of what poetry is, and can be.” But it’s also something we have to take into consideration as we listen to the group’s response to our poems.

“The stuff that makes you unique, you need to try to go with that stuff,” Ralph told me.

If we did not count the diversity of the group as a strength, and work hard to hear multiple responses to each poem, we might fall into a trap that both Hildred and Ralph described: the creative writing workshop group-think poem. Ralph described to me one occasion when the group seemed to slip into an easy consensus with which he was uncomfortable. It was too much like the group stamping committee approval on the revision they were working on.

“Somebody’s poem was being talked about,” he said, and somebody [else] said, ‘that line, I think it’s been said. I think you could kind of just cut right down from here to there.’ And then someone else said, ‘Yes, that’s it...’ I just felt that, the guy made a comment, and once the other person said ‘yes’ that’s it,’ I think that the sense in the group was, that’s it.”

“Oh,” I asked, “and that’s end of discussion?”

“On that issue. Like we had come to the truth. ... Like that’s what needs to be done. Like it’s an operation, and this is the was how you do it.”

“Right, and here’s the answer,” I said, “like there’s one answer to this poem.”

“Right. And I’m uncomfortable with any ‘the answer,’ you know.”

I don’t think, however, that our group is prone to this kind of reaction to a poem, and I mentioned that to Ralph. “But this group is very
comfortable saying, okay, now, let's move on the next thing, and leaving it with all three suggestions on the table,” I said. This may be one of the most useful aspects of the group's response; by allowing several people’s suggestions to sit alongside one another, and not trying to come to some kind of consensus about what the poem should be, we are creating a temporary space for alternate texts, a kind of a bubble in which options for the poem can exist without pushing one another aside. Later, after our conversation is over, the poet will decide which text will she will authorize, but during our conversation we create options.

Ralph agreed with me, and pointed out that the ability to lay out options for revision, instead of pushing for group consensus, as if we could find the one right answer to a text, is also one way that we acknowledge each poet's individuality and the uniqueness of each poet's work.

"I think that's a kind of respect," he said. "Because I think that there's a terrible kind of arrogance, where the group can group-think a poem and say 'this is what needs to be done, poet.' I think the poet has to have room in there to go back and tinker but still make it his or her own poem. I think that's been happening pretty much. ... I feel like I have to hold back from people, really. I have to hold back from the poem getting sucked into this vortex of snip, snip, cut, compress."

Despite our need for a community of poets, then, we also recognize that it's not the group who will write the final product, which is certainly for the best. It helps to hear the group's multiple responses, but eventually we will take the poem back to the solitude of our own desks.

"You need the solitary, the solitude," Ralph told me, "[despite] all the emphasis on collaborative writing that's out there. It's very trendy right now, but I feel very strongly that a poem is a solitary endeavor. You go deep
inside your soul, if that doesn't sound like too much of a cliché, and you wrestle with something and you bring it back up. And I don't think there's been many examples of collaborative poetry that are worth anything, in fact." Ralph's use of the word "soul" echoes both Jim's insistence that poetry "connect with one's heart," and the emphasis on experience that brings Brock to want "human response."

"So what you have, in a group when it's working well," I asked Ralph, "is a kind of suspension, a willingness to respect the poem as the poet's poem, and yet have some kind of a dialogue about it, or with it?"

"Right."

"Instead of that snip, snip, change it? ... And here it is, we've fixed it, and give it back to the poet?"

"Yes. 'It's better. And it's only two lines long. It's so much quicker to read!' " He laughed and then told me about a talk he'd heard once which ended with a basketball metaphor.

"This guy said the greatest players like Bird and Johnson were able to (and this is the part I love) they were able to wed the paradox of self and other to make their team play better. Isn't that beautiful?" I nodded; he knew I'd like it, as basketball is a common interest of ours. "The paradox of 'I am me and I'm alone, and I'm a great player, but also, I'm also on a team.' The great ones always understood that. I think Bird's teammates went beyond themselves because he was a great player. And Johnson, too. Well, I think in the poetry group you're wrestling with that same paradox, self and other. You know?"

How do we handle this paradox between self and other in the poetry group? We need to have people to "bounce stuff off," as Ralph puts it, and at the same times, we need those people to recognize the boundaries, different
for each poet and for each poem and constantly being negotiated, beyond which they need to give the poem back to the poet. If the poet trusts and respects the readers (and trusts that they will respect him and what he's trying to do) he is more likely to be able to hear their suggestions. What we need, according to Ralph, is “all the things that happen in a community, you know?”

“There’s a basic measure of acceptance without which it would be a very different kind of feedback,” he said. “There are times that I’ll just send a bunch of poems to somebody who doesn’t know me, or something, but I realize that there’s no promise that the stuff won’t come back in a meat grinder. But with this group, you know, there’s a sense that people are coming from a similar point of view. We’re going to be respectful. We’re going to be positive.”

Part of being respectful is recognizing the poet’s intentions, and her ownership of the text. Another part, apparently, is being positive. Ralph told me that’s one thing he likes about Brock’s comments: he’s always careful to point out what he likes, something positive. For example, early in the discussion of Tulips, immediately after Brock questioned the mint juleps and Amy agreed with him, Brock came back into the conversation and pointed out something he liked about the poem.

“It seems like the unreasonable red, really unreasonable red, is just perfect.”

“He’s pretty respectful,” Ralph said, later. “I mean, this sounds kind of formulaic, but he seems to always find as much to say that he likes about the poem as he does make suggestions for changes. And that goes down well with me.”
A Place for the Doing of Poetry

According to Ralph, poets are a little bit extraordinary. "As a poet, you're doing something that's still kind of weird, you know. It's not mainstream. It's a little bit like alchemy; it's a little bit frowned upon in this society," he said. "If you want to go see the Celtics," he continued, going back to basketball, and bringing my husband into the discussion, "you know, Todd and I can go down and we've got community there. We buy a ticket. We know where it is. And actually the truth is, you can almost talk to any guy on the street about sports. I don't mean to be sexist, but it seems like it's something that men can talk about, strangers. It's a safe subject."

"But with poetry, what I wanted to say that I think is important to me, is that I feel the need to seek community. You just need people who don't look at it as weird, or arcane. Or other people for whom it's really living and important and vital. It's even more than just writing to some friends who I know that are poets; I just feel the need to be in the same room with people, with texts."

"Somebody said that if you want to learn something, you hang out with people who are doing it. If you want to learn how to sail, you hang out with people who are sailing. Find someone who is joyfully engaged in whatever the literacy is. And I think that it's exciting to me to be with people who are just writing these poems. And it's inspirational in a very indirect way. By indirect I mean that I don't ever go back and say oh, gee, I'm going to go back and write a poem about my ancestors' graveyard..."
“Right.” I laughed; he was referring to my poem about my ancestors’
graveyard, shared the same evening as *Tulips*. “That would be very
direct inspiration.”

“It’s more like you know, what is poetry? And to hear it really read,
and people who are really wrestling with it: it’s a different kind of
inspiration than I get from going by books.”

Brock, too, told me that the group’s conversations were helping him
to define what poetry is. “I’m still, in some ways, lost on the question of is it
possible to find a definition of poetry, or any kind of agreement of what is
good poetry,” he said. “Because often, what other people seem to like, I don’t
like at all. And even down to individual people’s stuff; sometimes Hildred’s
stuff is completely over my head, but everyone says, Oh! Wonderful! Great!,
so I’m like, gee, okay.” He shrugged. “And then two or three times, I’ve
read through her poems, and I’m going, ‘Yeah! I get this! This is neat!’
and everybody else is going, ‘Ah, Hildred, I really don’t know what’s
happening here.’ And so that is still a mystery to me.” But the examples
provided by the group are helping him learn more about poetry: “I’ve
gradually been feeling stronger and more confident about my own ability to
be a poetry critic, and somebody who knows a little bit about it. And the
group is helping me do that. Within the group I can see so many different
varieties of good poetry.”

Sometimes I have to search hard to find a poem to bring to our group
– I haven’t happened to write one that week, and I dig around in older work
for something that feels unfinished, or I slap together a new draft, from
notes lying around. I’m not the only one – I remember Ruth and Drew
joking before one meeting – they had spoken earlier in the day, and at that
point neither had anything to bring. Now here they both were, with new
drafts. "Record-setting speed," said Drew. Just having to the meeting to go
to pushes us to produce poems – the deadline gives us the occasion to write,
a benefit many of the group members told me was important to them. But
we don’t have to meet the deadline; we could (and do) skip an occasional
meeting with no loss of face. That would mean, though, that we’d miss out
on the fun. The fun is listening to the poems, and the responses to the
poems. I don’t come to the meetings primarily because I am attached to my
draft and want help revising it, although sometimes that’s true, but
because of my enthusiasm for the the whole experience – for the doing of
poetry. We need a place for this doing, and the group’s existence provides
that place.

This is not simply a call for a place to share work. Hildred, in fact,
commented on my use of the word “share” to describe what we do with our
poems: “That’s so overused, don’t you think? The denotation has been lost in
the touchy-feely connotation.” And this “community” isn’t just a touchy-
feeling gathering of individuals who through the sharing of their work
magically create an opportunity for individual and collective achievement.
The existence of a live audience does not guarantee a situation where the
writer or writing will benefit, because the complexity of any group creates a
situation where “sharing” a text, particularly a text which is recognized as
highly personal, can be problematic for the writer. In addition, the sharing
of work with the group does not guarantee an opportunity for the collective
achievement of vision or re-vision. Our poetry group has achieved what it
has by maintaining a carefully structured routine in which it is safe to take
risks, by carefully negotiating differences in expectations, and because of
the trust created through the sharing of personal stories and texts. This
creates the opportunity for individuals to re-see their texts, to re-place their poems with new poems, contingent texts authorized by the group.

Even as I re-type *Tulips*, and listen again to our responses, taped a year ago, I see things in the poem I didn’t see then. I notice the desire in the poem:

\[
\text{and I want to study them...}
\]
\[
\text{want to observe carefully...}
\]
\[
\text{want to bury my nose...}
\]
\[
\text{want to drink mint juleps...}
\]
\[
\text{want to put my heavy arms gently oh gently around}
\]
\[
\text{soft fluted shoulders}
\]
\[
\text{and whisper...}
\]

I admire the way Ralph stresses the desire with the repetition of “I want.” We didn’t respond to the poem as a love poem, despite the tulips’ *chaste points*, the whispering, the gentle-oh-so-gentle caresses, but now I see it that way. I didn’t notice then what now stands out for me so clearly: the contrast between the gentleness and the raw desire.

\[
\text{empty of everything}
\]
\[
\text{but common light and raw spring air.}
\]

So, in noticing these things now, finding meaning in them, I am still responding to the poem, and I may still be writing versions of the poem for myself even as Ralph, true owner of the poem, rewrites his own. I am still involved in the doing of poetry.

What the poetry group’s careful, respectful response gives us is a sense that poems are revise-able. As we listen to readers pay close attention to our poems, attention as close as the attention Ralph gave those tulips, we
learn more about all the things the poem might be. We learn about how several different, skillful readers might interpret a poem, and how they might revise to fit their new interpretation, and the diversity of the group increases our own repertoire of response.
CHAPTER FIVE

REVISION RESPONSE: FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The poet Marvin Bell, in his article "Poetry Is a Way of Life, Not a Career," writes that "Poetry is the residue of bloody brain work, the signal that a process has taken place..." (B5) I think I might go so far as to say that the poetry is the "bloody brain work" itself, and ceases to exist once the work is done. The poem existed as the poet was doing her work. The text, that which we call usually call the "poem" when we see it lying on a table or when it is published in a journal, is the only the residue. To reduce the text to "residue" places an extreme emphasis on process, and uncovers my own bias towards writing process pedagogy, and, I suspect, a healthy writer's love of the work itself, the doing of it. My own poems, unless I am working on them, are only artifacts.

But artifact may become a poem again, when I re-read it. A reader does her own work, whether that reader be the poet or someone else, work similar to but not identical to the poet's work. I see reading as the creation of a new text, another process of composition, or meaning making (Berthoff). The reader creates meaning through a transaction with a text (Rosenblatt). A group of readers can do similar work together, through a conversation. The group's work is not identical to either the poet's work or the individual reader's work. In this study, it's the the group's process I've looked at; this dissertation is about the "bloody brain work" that the group does.

One of the benefits I derive, as a participating poet, from the "brain
work” of the group, is that I learn to see my own poems in a new light. I see options for my own text, alternative texts I didn’t see before. It can be confusing, but that too is part of my process as a writer; I try to cultivate, as Berthoff says a composer of meaning must, a high tolerance for chaos. What happened when the group read my poem *Tides* is a good example of purposeful delay of closure this requires.

*Tides*

*Your silence, palpable as the ocean,*
*looner than the brown thrush’s song,*
*rolls in on the tide. Vetch*
*covers the dunes, salt-strengthened.*

*Pipers scatter, hurrying on little legs*
*to get to the other end of the beach.*
*Dusk creeps up on me, hidden*
*in the breath of a bird song. I drift out to sea.*

*Green strands of sea plants*
*pull me back as if they were a lasso.*
*I am gazing at the blank wall of dunes,*
*wondering why you bother to pull me back in.*

*You told me long ago your father*
*counted cards; I shouldn’t try*
*to win at gin rummy. Another piece*
*of summer innocence washed out to sea.*

*Towels, abandoned card games,*
*Summer Casual furniture,*
*wait for the storm, sweeping in.*
*Salt and sand drift into the living room.*

*Now a gull flaps down into our path*
*then wheels away, creating*
*a kind of ocean vertigo;*
*we step away, toward, away.*

— Andrea Luna

The fourth and fifth stanzas of my poem, *Tides*, describe scenes from my life, scenes that maybe I understand better than anyone who
wasn't there, and perhaps too well to fit them into the poem. Richard Hugo, in *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing*, writes that "The poet's relationship to the triggering subject should never be as strong as... his relation to his words. The words should not serve the subject. The subject should serve the words. This may mean violating the facts" (6). I have had trouble, with this poem, freeing myself from the tyranny of the actual details of my life. The "you" in the fourth stanza, for example, was an ex-boyfriend, someone who I had spent quite a bit of time with on beaches all over North America.

"You told me long ago your father counted cards; I shouldn't try to win at gin rummy. Another piece of summer innocence washed out to sea.

It came clear to me that I couldn't trust him one day when I was his family's guest in Hawaii. He told me not to play gin rummy with his father; I realized the values he grew up with, values that would allow a host to cheat a guest at cards, were too foreign for me to understand. Of course, there's no way I could explain all that in that one stanza. But somehow it seemed important, so I left it in; in the back of my mind, I expected someone in my poetry group would somehow come up with a paraphrase that would force it to fit in.

The fifth stanza was about the aftermath of a hurricane, a summer house I had helped clean up on Padre Island in the Gulf of Mexico.

"Towels, abandoned card games, Summer Casual furniture, wait for the storm, sweeping in. Salt and sand drift into the living room.

An entirely different beach, but somehow connected in my mind because of the violence done by the storm to the innocent room and to my

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trust in the universe. I knew when I brought the poem to the group that those two stanzas weren't working. I had pulled too many images from too many beaches, and I was trying to force too many things to make meaning together.

But my poetry group found something in the poem to salvage, and they did it by ruthlessly cutting my history out of the poem, leaving just the other four stanzas:

_Tides_

_Your silence, palpable as the ocean,
 louder than the brown thrush's song,
 rolls in on the tide. Vetch
 covers the dunes, salt-strengthened._

_Pipers scatter, hurrying on little legs
to get to the other end of the beach._
_Dusk creeps up on me, hidden
in the breath of a bird song. I drift out to sea._

_Green strands of sea plants
pull me back as if they were a lasso._
_I am gazing at the blank wall of dunes,
 wondering why you bother to pull me back in._

_Now a gull flaps down into our path
then wheels away, creating
a kind of ocean vertigo;
we step away, toward, away._

Now, two versions of _Tides_ exist simultaneously: the group's version, which seems to be about distance between people on a beach, and my own version, which I had hoped would include a lack of trust, perhaps the cause of that distance. I think there's something in my version that's been washed out of the group's version, something I wasn't able to articulate and which, therefore, the group didn't see. And I think of my version as flawed by a mixture of tones and by my inability to let go of the autobiographical details. That means I'll need to revise the poem. But I
never had any illusion that I wouldn't have to; it was a poem-in-progress when I brought it to the group, not a final draft. Now it's two poems-in-progress.

By inviting the group into my revision process, that process becomes less linear, not recursive, but branching. The group's draft may be a tangent; the process is a dialectic with occasional dead ends. As we respond to a poem, we create a draft, or drafts, which may compete with the draft the poet has in mind, or may be accepted by the poet as the new version of the poem. We create options. As we listen to readers pay close attention to our poems, we learn more about all the things the poem might be. We learn about how several different, skillful readers might interpret a poem, how they might revise it to fit their new interpretation, and the diversity of the group increases our own repertoire of response. Hearing the group respond to my poem helps me move, as in the last line of the poem, *away, toward, away*, from my text, just as I watched my mother, when I was a child, step back from her easel to get perspective on a painting, and then step towards it again.

**Revision Means Being Open to Options**

I've read our group's activities and motivations, and, particularly, the language we use in our conversations, through the lens of my own bias as a process oriented writer, as a participant of the group interested in its continued existence and success, and as a teacher who believes that knowledge is constructed in social settings. I will discuss the implications of interpreting through my own philosophical stances, the necessary
subjectivity of the participant-observer doing this kind of field work, in the
next chapter. First, though, in this chapter, I will outline what I see as the
important findings of the study, attempting to develop a grounded theory
which addresses one of the most important questions with which I began:
what is it that constitutes good response in the context of this writing
group?

The first of these findings is that the goal of response is not to gather
suggestions for ways that a writer can rewrite her text. We do make
suggestions, but when we tell the writer what “may need work” in their
poems, we are opening up options, defining possibilities for the text which
the writer might not have been able to see. Our goal, instead of guiding the
poet’s rewriting, is to revise the poem ourselves, through our discussion.
What the poetry group’s careful, respectful response gives us, then, is a
sense that poems are revise-able, but not necessarily specific instruction
for rewriting.

If the goal were simply to rewrite the poem, there might be more
pressure to decide, during the discussion, just what the final draft would
look like. But in this group of skilled respondents, we can see instead, in
discussions like the one about the ending of Don’s poem *Love Measured By
Distance*, several alternatives proposed by readers with no one possible text
privileged, at least for the moment. Just as when the group discussed
*Tides*, several options for new directions are laid on the table. There is no
closing down, no final revision authorized by the group. Ralph and I
discussed what happens when a group is not able or willing to find space
on the table for more than one option, when there is pressure to reach
some consensus about what the next draft of the poem should look like.
The rewriting process then becomes a closing down instead of an opening
up. When this happens, the sense that the vision involved in poetry is something dynamic is lost.

If we define revision more broadly than the production of a new text, as reseeing a text, or re-conceptualizing an idea, this ability of the group to lay multiple options on the table is invaluable. And this definition of revision as re-seeing is not, of course, a new one. Don, in fact, wrote nearly twenty years ago, that “Revision – the process of seeing what you’ve said to discover what you have to say – is the motivating force within most writers” (Murray, 1978). A response group, telling you what they think you said, and proposing what you might have to say next, can motivate discovery by producing a range of new possibilities. Invention and revision become closely linked in this model of response as conversation which leads to options, and, as we see in LeFevre’s influential work, invention is increasingly being seen as a social act. In the model of good response I am proposing, revision becomes a social act, which stems from the reading of the poem by the group through conversation.

Fish, of course, proposed that the individual reader is always reading with and within a group, in a sense, creating meaning which is authorized by the “interpretive communities” of which he is a member. The interpretive community agrees to agree on what a valid interpretation is; however, Fish also claims that the interpretations form the interpretive community. I believe that his argument is closely parallel to Wertsch’s claim that the proper unit of analysis of human action must be a “person(s)-acting-with-mediational-means.” Because any action is accomplished through and therefore shaped by mediational means – tools and language being his primary examples – it makes little sense to look at either the agents or the means through which they are working as
separate entities. The proper unit of analysis for the looking at the act of response, then, is the respondents-acting-through conversation, in Wertsch's terms, or the dynamic of an interpretive community which, unlike many of the examples Fish discusses himself, is gathered in one place so that we can watch its on-going development. The bubble of opportunity for creating new meanings which is opened up by the alternative texts proposed by our group members is a locale for that development, and the new meanings created can lead the poet to substantial revision.

Student writers may resist, as I did when I was a freshman poet, the idea that multiple meanings for their text offer any promise. How can we get a student writer to see that her text may mean something different than what she thought it meant? Poets need practice listening to interpretations of their own work; games where it's easier to listen because the group is trying to guess, rather than to edit or rewrite, may help some poets do this. Games can also be used to invent new drafts; poems can be exchanged and then rewritten with obviously nonsensical rules (make the word "rabbit" fit in somewhere, cut three words from every stanza, revise this poem as if it were your autobiography), purely for the fun of seeing what happens when the language or the perspective changes. Computer technology allows for easy access to multiple drafts, as well as easy manipulation of text.

But the best way for students to begin to discover the joy of revising their own texts through the response of others is to allow them to gather in groups and talk about their work. Groups of students can also practice actually writing down two or three new versions on paper; this would emphasize the fact that the group does not need to agree on one final
version of the text, as that is the poet's prerogative anyway. The group's poems should never be published in place of the poet's version. Emphasis must be placed on the original poet's versions carrying more authority. But if the individual writer's version is privileged over the group's collaborative text(s), she may not feel as threatened. The writer also has to have control over revision; though you can push her to rewrite for practice, you can't push her to revise for real, and you shouldn't require her to claim a text she hasn't revised by choice.

In fact, the writer must be allowed not to rewrite at all. Revision doesn't necessarily include rewriting a particular text; it may mean abandoning a draft. It may lead to new pieces of writing, weeks or months later. Writers need to be able to choose to rewrite or not, depending on how they now see, after re-seeing with the help of a group, their texts, the strategies available to them, and themselves as poets. Too often, revision in classroom settings has narrowed to enforced rewriting, as teachers have pushed their students through a step-by-step caricature of the writing process. The notion of revision must include the less tangible parts of revision, more of the visioning and less of the re-writing.

Teachers of writing need to know more about the way that response, from peers working in groups as well as from other readers including the teachers themselves, impacts the writing process. Future research should include work which examines actual conversations between both student writers and writers in other situations in order to describe the ways in which meaning is mediated and authorized within and through the conversations themselves. What happens when individuals in the group bring differing assumptions about meaning itself into the conversation? How are differences in epistemology, in discourses, or in the definition of
the task itself negotiated? Is it these differences, or perhaps the conversation which mediates between them, what actually makes the creation of options, and therefore the possibility of revision, possible? What happens when students are allowed to define the task of their response groups, or to reflect on their success?

Negotiating Around the Complex Task

Don's succinct definition of what we are up to – “The response is supportive, emphasizing what the reader heard in the poem, what works, and what may need work,” – reflects the complexity of the task our group has set for itself, as I discussed in Chapter One. This complexity is a second important finding of this study: the act of response is complicated by conflicting assumptions about where meaning lies. On one hand, we assume the poet has the ultimate authority to decide what the poem means – the rest of us are support personnel. This is writer-oriented, a stance with roots in the Romantic idea of sincerity (Luna), the well-entrenched sanctity of individual authorship (Gere), and the expressivist tradition. At the same time, however, when we ask for response we assign the readers the authority to express what the poem means, and the responsibility to articulate that meaning, for the poet and the group. This stance places emphasis on the reader; its roots extend into transactional theories, where the meaning is created in the interaction of reader and text. Both reader-oriented and writer-oriented assumptions about where the meaning of a text lies can conflict with efforts to make a poem mean something on its own terms. Internal consistency of the text – making the
parts of the poem work together – is a primary goal, implied by the search for what “works.” This stance is text-oriented, and it begs the question of who is responsible for making meaning; it assumes that the meaning of the text lies in the text, available for any reader, assuming that the text is “working” in all its parts and pieces, without saying whom the text is working upon.

That these assumptions about what where meaning lies sometimes cause disruption in our conversations was evident during the discussion of Don’s poem, *Military History*. Don, drawing from writing process tradition, asks readers what they hear; he would like to know what is being understood so that he can clarify if necessary, but much of the meaning he makes with the poem is grounded in his own autobiography and sometimes, therefore, inaccessible to his readers. Grace, drawing on the discourse of text-oriented theories, pushes him to reinterpret the poem on its own terms. This temporarily creates a disharmony in the conversation, experienced by some of the participants as tension. In this case, Brock was able to defuse some of the tension when he switched from text-oriented discussion to reader-oriented response. He addressed the same interpretational problem, but phrasing it in the conventions of expressionism, which, because of this particular poem, this particular poet, and this particular moment, was less harmful to the weave of the conversation. Brock is perfectly capable of looking at the text as a text, separate from his experience with it, but he decided that would not be appropriate at this moment.

The value placed on the authenticity of the poet’s expression, and on experience as the basis of writing, conflicts with the commitment to the craft of revision and the group’s stated purpose of offering advice on what
“may need work.” Belief in authenticity and experience requires the protection of both the author's intentions and the author's ownership of the poem. This places so much emphasis on the meaning of the poem as the author sees it that the group has to negotiate a place for the competing poem we are creating.

So we see that assumptions about where meaning ought to be found can create disharmonies, or fault lines, in the conversations of the group, which require negotiation to work through. It is also possible that conflicting assumptions about meaning can be intrapersonal as well interpersonal; some of the confusion Jim expresses, for example, when he discusses objectivity and subjectivity in writing and responding to poems, is clearly informed by theories which conflict. On the other hand, just as Brock's ability to switch the conversation to a reader-oriented mode allows the group to continue the conversation, Jim's ability to switch to a text oriented discourse allows him to discuss Nowadays as an object separate from himself, thereby bringing several more layers of meaning into the conversation.

So, because of the intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts in assumptions about what we are up to when we read, the work of the group is as much, maybe more, social as it is textual – and the success of the group depends as much on the ability of the group members to negotiate between conflicting demands as it does on the individuals' abilities to interpret and respond to texts. One of the goals of any group, according to Goffman's dramaturgical theory, is to maintain what he calls the "situational definition" – a tacit idea or set of ideas about what the goals of a specific encounter are and who is supposed to play which roles. In our group, as we've seen in Chapter Three, there are clearly underlying
notions about what is appropriate behavior for poets and for respondents – for example, poets are to act as if they appreciate all the response they receive, because the tacit understanding of why we are gathered includes the idea that the poet wants to hear about her reader's interpretations. If all players play their assigned roles properly, the action can continue without interruption or disruption.

Wertsch mentions that dramaturgical action, as described in Goffman's work, is one of the four ways Habermas says that sociology has of looking at actions. These four approaches all involve an interaction between agent and environment – in the case of dramaturgical analysis, the actor and the scene. But Wertsch prefers not to use the term “role” for the mediated actions he analyzes because, he says, it reflects assumptions about the nature of human action which do not underlie his analysis. He may be referring to the taint of deceit or insincerity which Goffman's term “impression management,” the goal of role-playing, carries with it, and which Brock alluded to when he discussed our group's ability to always appear to be supportive. Wertsch prefers Bakhtin's term “voice” to describe mediational means. In our group, the “voices” we use carry traces of the different critical traditions we have been exposed to; reader-response theory and New Criticism speak through the participants in the group. And the participants, in term, speak through the different critical theories. But I've used “role” in my own description, however, instead of Wertsch's term “voice,” because I want to stress the scene, the site in which interactions between the agents produce meaning. If the individual participants to do not take the responsibility to play whatever role is theirs at the moment, or if they lack the skill, the group act of response is likely to be less successful, no matter which voices individuals carry into the group.
with them.

Response is a complex act in this group setting. In some of the theoretical models which authorize the reader's interpretation of a text, we see some of the same dialectics, but perhaps with fewer of the complications I have been describing. Transactional theory locates the meaning of a text in the transaction between reader and text; but during this transaction, the reader works with the author of the text absent. The dialectic here is between reader and text. However, if the writer is also present, he creates a third point in the dialectic (which, I suppose, then becomes a trialectic, or a triangle.) If there is more than one reader, as well, as in a response group, the dialectic becomes a conversation. Fish posits that the meaning of a text is authorized by the shared assumptions of a group of readers, an interpretive community, but his interpretive community is rather abstract; the members of an interpretive community are not necessarily in the same room with one another, and the act of reading does not require social negotiation, or the playing of roles by the reader. The static model of a preexisting interpretive community within which the individual respondent's interpretation makes sense does not take into account the live action give and take, the dialectic between individual and group, at least not at the pace it happens here. Models of reader-oriented response, then, although useful because they take the reader's interpretation into account when locating the meaning of a text, are less complex, flatter, perhaps, than what I've described happening in a group of live respondents.

Implications of this complex description of the act of negotiating response for classroom writing instruction include the necessity of what Gere refers to as semi-autonomous response groups. The autonomy of the
response group is important. Although groups in classrooms will usually not be completely autonomous, they need to be free to learn how to define their task, assign authority for interpretation, and negotiate between emerging theories of meaning. An autonomous writing group will often be able to negotiate this kind of switch more easily than teacher-led writing group, because they do not look to the teacher to direct the conversation. Writers also need to choose who they are working with. Teachers should work to foster relationships between students, giving them ample time to get to know one another, and opportunities to choose who they will be working with. Teachers also need to recognize that some of the talk in response groups will be serving to create and cement relationships; what may seem “off task” becomes “on task,” when we define the task more broadly.

How do you get a group of students to recognize and negotiate the two assumptions (which sometimes conflict) that the poem belongs to the poet, and that they are rewriting the poem? A “movie of the reader’s mind” (Elbow and Belanoff), such as the one Brock created for Don about how he had developed an understanding of Military History, can be a more effective response strategy than the head-on suggestion for change. It also clearly shows a tug-of-war between the reader who wants the poem to make sense outside of the context of the writer’s history and writer’s investment in telling his own story. This kind of work makes tensions between the writer’s meaning and the reader’s meaning explicit for students. The negotiation of these tensions is an opportunity to make meaning, for both the readers and the writer. Students also need to be made conscious of strategies for maintaining harmony in a group while meaning is negotiated.
All of these suggestions imply that it is educative to prod students to reflect on differing theories of meaning, as opposed to presenting them with one overarching theory. Students could be asked to reflect on where the meaning lies in a poem, to recognize conflicts of authorship, and be taught specifically how to negotiate between different ways of reading, and perhaps more importantly, to listen to the poet's cues on which critical tradition might be most appropriate to draw on when responding to the poet's poem.

But borrowing from different critical traditions, each with their own ways of reading and underlying epistemologies may seem problematic. It makes sense to ask if our poetry group, or any response group, would be better off if we held one coherent theory of meaning? If we sat down and explicitly outlined which types of response, derived from which theories, we were going to agree to stick to, we would not have to work so hard to read the context of the group. Firmly entrenched in one critical tradition, we might be able to concentrate more effort on the text and less on reading the group.

However, because the task of the group is complex, with both explicit and tacit components, choosing one way of reading would be inappropriate in this situation. Although the explicit task of the group is to read and respond to poems, so it would seem that agreeing on a theory of reading might be important, part of the implicit task, as Goffman claims is the task of any group, is to maintain an impression of harmony. Group members are aware that there are many ways of reading, and that their collaborators in the group situation may ascribe to theories which conflict with their own. But because they are able to read and respond to the social situation, as well as to poems, they are able to transcend or negotiate those
differences. If the tension in the group seems to escalate because a particular response is ill-received, or because it seems that the group is not going to be able to negotiate a particular question about a poem, the participants move to defuse the situation; they back down, make a joke, or change the focus of the conversation. Creating a situation where each participant feels a sense of competence, as a poet or as a reader, is more important than remaining loyal to any particular way of reading.

In addition, the occasional epistemological conflict seen in this group's conversations may actually be generative. An overarching theory of meaning might close off some of the revision which is created through the conversation of the group. Criteria based response, encouraged by text-oriented, objective theories, can lead to a debate or dialectic, for example, which produces an alternative text created jointly by the debaters, and which might not have come into existence if we had agreed to avoid objective response altogether. In the same conversation, personal connections, which are authorized by a completely different critical tradition, may lead to other understandings, or enlarge the debate, as we saw when the poetry group responded to my *Lighthouse* poem. Revision requires that the poet find new angles from which to view the poem. Our movement through different ways of reading finds new angles. When participants in this group claim that the group's activities teach them how to read poetry, they are not implying that they are learning the way to read poetry, but rather, that they are learning ways to read.

What our group is interested in achieving is not a consistent approach to response, but rather a pragmatic approach, response which seems to be affecting something – creating new interpretations, influencing someone's opinions, making new poetry – and which borrows
from whatever theory or discourse it is expedient to borrow from at that moment, in that context. This expediency is analogous to the way Newkirk describes teacher Pat McClure’s “tacit, intuitive, seemingly instinctual” decisions as she responds to her first and second graders in reading groups. Her skill in working with the young readers is “contextual, personal, particular, local; it can be revealed by not abstractly defined.” I am afraid that moving from quick, expedient, skillful moves between what Newkirk calls “microtheories” to a more coherent macrotheory might cause the group to lose some of the spontaneity, some of the diversity, and some of the skill which its participants, as we have seen in Chapter Four, so clearly value.

Good response in this group, then, does not require a single way of reading texts, which would require the identification of a coherent critical theory guiding the group. Instead, it describes a way of reading both text and situation to produce response, and requires a theory about how the group works together to create meaning. The critical theories of group members are embedded in a theory of social behavior which allows us to learn from one another. Don Graves has said that knowing who knows what is one of the most important things children in tomorrow’s classrooms will have to learn (personal conversation, 1993). In the poetry group, we each have different knowledge (of life, of literature, of language, of the formal features of different kinds of poetry, of ways to respond...); we need to know one another well to discover who has what strengths – to find the experts, the knowledgeable tutors. Working in a group, over an extended period of time, enables us to build relationships in which we all can serve as mentors at different times for different people. This creates a situation in which, instead of just one teacher building scaffolds to prod
many children into their various “proximal zones” of development (Vygotsky), many learners help one another explore a web of new spaces and options.

Such a web can be likened to the phenomena of “intersubjectivity” described by Wertsch, in his article “The Zone of Proximal Development,” which emphasizes that learning is created through the use of language. “Intersubjectivity” is the state which exists between two or more individuals when they are share a situation definition. He points out that “semitic mediation” is key to Vygotsky’s theory, but the phenomena of intersubjectivity is “sometimes conceptualized as operating independently of speech, a view that mistakenly assumes that speech simply names or reflects a previously existing situation definition. Such a view,” Wertsch continues, “overlooks the fact that intersubjectivity is often created through the use of language” (13). In other words, it is our conversation which allows us to arrive at an intersubjective state in which we can carry on with the creation of meaning required by the act of response. In the poetry group, our talk is not guided by a previous consensus about how to read poems; instead, the talk shapes our understanding of what it means to read poems. We don’t agree on a way of reading poems, we create ways of reading particular poems, and we learn from one another. As a participant in the group, I am content, because my own overarching epistemology depends on a belief that meaning is constructed in social situations in a dynamic, dialectic fashion, to interact with and learn from the other participants ways of reading and responding, particularly so if they are different from my own.

More descriptive studies of people actively involved in reading and writing together may illuminate the dynamics of response. Unfortunately,
many studies of writing groups have defined success for the group in
terms of staying "on" a teacher-defined "task." It's important to investigate
how groups function when they have to define their task themselves, to
discover what tasks they set themselves, what their criteria of success are,
and what actually happens in such groups. If there are multiple ways of
defining what it means to read a poem in a group, for example, then the
tension that produces, a tension which may be productive, is part of what
we need to investigate if we want to describe how the group works. Some
questions which might be useful to investigate include what discourses do
students borrow from as they work? Which theories of meaning provide the
scripts readers use when they respond to a writer? When, and how, do
respondents decide to switch from responding to poem to responding to
poet?

A Repertoire of Response

Respondents in our poetry group have a range of strategies for
response which they can choose from, and, as we've seen, they switch
from one strategy to another as seems appropriate. The different types of
response used in this group include reader-based responses such as
saying what we like about the poem, describing our own encounter with
the poem, paraphrasing the meaning of a poem as they see it, and
articulating personal connections; text-based responses such as describing
the form and content, analyzing the relationships between parts of the
poem, and searching for internal consistency; and writer-based responses
such as addressing specific concerns of the author, questioning the author
about her intentions, and asking for clarifications.

As we saw in the previous section, when and how each of these different types of responses is used depends entirely on the context in which it is being used. Respondents apparently consider who the poet is, how that poet reacts to certain types of response, what the poet is saying during this particular conversation, what the other participants in the conversation are saying, what type of poem it is, and what interpretations are being proposed. The discussion of Jim's poem *Nowadays*, in the middle of which group members switched strategies because of Jim's revelation that his narrator was a fictional character, is a good example of the ability of participants to read the context and adjust their response strategies accordingly. But in order to make these kinds of adjustments, the group members must have a repertoire of ways to respond.

Different ways to respond to poems, as well as to receive response, can be probably be learned; they can at least be acquired in the sense that Gee discusses the acquisition of secondary discourses; for example, the habit of silence which several of us try to practice was picked up from creative writing workshops, and we also use strategies we learned from writing process classrooms, and from conferencing with students. Perhaps classrooms can be structured to encourage the acquisition of a repertoire of responses. The imposition of rules about silence, or the exclusion of the so-called "affective fallacy," for example, in creative writing classrooms gave some of the poets in this group a chance to practice skills which we value to the extent to which we find them useful. Perhaps teachers in all sorts of writing classrooms could temporarily change the structure of the classroom response groups to give students practice at a range of ways to read and articulate interpretation.
In my own composition classroom, I have used Elbow and Belanoff's series of graduated response exercises to help composition students develop a repertoire of ways to respond to the essays of their classmates; the strategies Elbow and Belanoff ask students to practice range from simple sharing, where the writer reads, and the readers just listen; through descriptive feedback, including identifying the writing's "center of gravity," or giving a blow-by-blow description of how the writing affected you (a "movie" of the reader's mind); to evaluative feedback, including criteria-based response. I have also invented my own series of exercises for several classes. In reading and writing workshops, teachers can use mini-lessons to teach response strategies. In creative writing classes, exercises at the beginning of class, before the group gets down to real work of responding to one another's poems, often serve the same purpose as mini-lessons.

Receiving response to writing can be threatening to even experienced writers. There are ways to make it safer for student writers to practice responding to writing. In some cases, it would be most appropriate to use a piece of writing written by someone outside the classroom, a previous student or a professional writer, to practice on. Addressing the poem instead of the poet is skill that has to be practiced. Anonymous response, close reading exercises with poems by unidentified authors in and out of the classroom, might help a class learn this skill. Responding to the poet and her personal issues first, then responding to the text, might also help students feel more comfortable with formal critiques. My informants were clear about need to nurture ideas, instead of "ripping them to pieces." Competition, or at least the impression of competition (because there probably always is competition) is not helpful to
many writers, especially writers who believe that they are putting themselves, their hearts, into their work, and an overemphasis on formal analysis may cause students to feel that they are in competition. It might be that expressing personal connections is a good place to start, and that the writer can cue the group when he is ready for more objective analysis, analysis the group has practiced previously.

Collaborative writing projects allow students to compose meaning together, without requiring a student-writer to turn over an original text to the group's negotiated vision, and provide an opportunity to talk about writing in which no particular individual's writing is at stake. It might also be effective to foreclose the group's activity before the draft is finished, and let the individuals write their own versions. The preliminary group activity will give the students practice thinking together, but the final texts will belong to individuals.

Emphasizing that there are many ways to respond to a text is important. In our group we switch between one strategy and another as seems appropriate. In a classroom situation, it may be that the writer needs the security of being able to request types of response the whole group has already been given the opportunity to practice. One of the reasons that having a repertoire of response strategies is important is because one never knows just what thing you say about a piece is going to be the thing that helps the writer out. Brock, an accomplished teacher, told me that it is "almost impossible to know as a critic or a reader, what will be valuable for somebody else." He pointed out that it is just as likely to be "some random comment, or some connection I've made" that helps the writer. He says it makes it fun; I'd say that it might also make it scary, and you need to be up front with students about this. The apparent
randomness of the ways that writers use response is also a little bit
intimidating if you apply it to the question of what kind of response is the
most valuable for teachers to give. But given regular opportunities to
receive response in semi-autonomous groups of peers, a writer is more
likely to find that just right suggestion, that perspective that surprises.

One important question which needs to be answered, however, is
can you teach these response types or strategies as skills, which can be
practiced in isolation, but will transfer into more “natural” and
challenging response situations? There may be an analogy here with the
long-standing debate over whether critical thinking skills can be taught in
isolation of the disciplines which use critical thinking. Once you take the
the strategies apart to teach them, can they be put back together? Are they
the kind of thing which can be learned versus acquired? This is obviously a
question for further research, but clearly the risk of students getting no
practice responding to one another, and thereby missing out on the
learning about revision, about writing, and about reading which happens
during the process of response, can be greatly reduced if semi-
autonomous, voluntary meetings between students is a major part of the
classroom routine.

Games, exercises, reflective activities, mini-lessons, all have to be
subsidiary to the real work, the work of messy, complicated conversations
about texts which mean something to the writers involved. The bulk of
time spent teaching students to respond to one another’s writing should be
spent in conversation. You can take the activities of the group apart and
practice the separate strategies, but for the students to learn to be skillful
respondents, they have to learn how to make the instant, contextual
decisions about which strategies to use when, and that learning, at least,
has to take place in the practice of semi-autonomous, messy, loud, off-task groups.

**Making A Place for the Poetry and the Poet**

The writing of the poem still is, as Ralph asserts, a solitary endeavor.” But, at the same time, the individuals in our group clearly value the relationships they have with one another, and they feel the response they receive is imbedded in those relationships. Response allows the poet to understand that his poem has been received by another human being, a reader or a group of readers. These kinds of relationships are important for group members to feel nurtured, not competitive, not silenced. Several of the participants of this group used the word “respect” to describe the relationships in the group, relationships which promoted trust and grew deep enough that the work of the group became easier. Poets claim that they can better appreciate response because they know their respondents and their respondent’s work. Respondents know what kinds of response are appropriate when because they know the poets and their work. The group can negotiate around disharmony and tension because they read one another.

One last, but very important finding of this study is that working together in a situation of safety and respect, where one tradition of reading may sometimes be privileged over another, but where diversity is valued so that none dominates, teaches us about poetry and about being poets. The diversity of the group’s responses increases our own repertoire of responses. We learn about how several different, skillful readers might
interpret a poem, how they might revise it to fit their new interpretation. As we listen to readers pay close attention to our poems, we learn more about all the things the poem might be. Response as I've redefined it is good for learning about poetry, learning about strategies for reading poetry, re-seeing ourselves as poets, and re-seeing the poem.

The safety of our group comes partly from the relationships we have established and partly from the routine. We work in a very structured way—going around the room in a particular order, setting a routine for the reading and response to each poem, and using standard, recognizable conversational turns like the poet's "thank you" at the end of the discussion to move the meeting along. This structure gives an anchor, a foundation for the chaos of multiple purposes, interpretations, and negotiation which is the actual work of the meeting.

Structured response groups make a place for poetry. One of my favorite stories about writing groups was Hildred's, about the time her teenage son held a poetry reading in her living room during school break. It was well-attended, with over a dozen readers ready to share. They spent the first forty-five minutes setting the rules for the reading, including designating an author's chair. Then, while they read their work to one another, they stretched those rules as far as they would go; one reader, instead of sitting in the designated author's seat, stood next to it while he read, carefully making sure to keep one finger on the arm of the chair the whole time. As a teacher, I am fascinated by this story, both because the kids chose to import a structure learned at school, the author's chair, and because they needed to undermine the structure to make it their own.

Progressive educators have been looking for a metaphor to replace the industrial production model of education for some time. Metaphors
from social settings other than school, particularly family settings, are popular. Nancie Atwell’s dining room table is an excellent example: the conversation around a dining room table is a metaphor for spontaneous, literate discussions which might allow for the kinds of responses writers need. It may also be that looking to other more organized activities such as church services or organized sports to provide other useful metaphors for successful ways to set up group encounters in classrooms. The structure of a ceremony or a game with rules provides a safe place in which the writer can share her work. Formality provides a built-in set of procedures; they can be modified, if necessary, as Hildred’s son and his friends modified the ritual of the author’s chair, but they can also provide something to fall back on when things get complicated. In our group, we know who will be going first, we move around the room in a set order, the poet reads the poem aloud, and then, after the discussion, thanks the group for their response. These procedures are not required, and when the situation demands, we vary them, but we can always return to them.

In reading and writing workshops, the routine of having an author’s chair, in which a writer sits to read his work and asks his readers specific questions — *What did you like? What did you want to hear more about?* — creates a space where the writer is guaranteed attention and has control over the turn-taking of his readers, and the power to take charge of the response he is receiving. Providing regular time to write has been shown to be important in classrooms (Hansen; Graves; Atwell) and building in times for writers to meet together is also important. Our group found that regular response times gave us a deadline to work toward, as well as reason to move on to the next poem, because we knew the group would be there every second and fourth Thursday.
Student writers need to practice ways of receiving response, as well as giving it. The writer needs to be allowed to talk, so that they feel like their authorship is protected, and so that they can ask for the kinds of feedback they feel will help. On the other hand, practice being silent may open a writer up to hearing the newer versions of their poems and finding surprises. The writer also needs to be always able to back down, to pull a poem out of public scrutiny, to choose which drafts are ready to receive response, or to claim a fictional narrator.

The important thing to remember is that all these activities and exercises, as useful as they are for practicing different response techniques, are not an end in and of themselves. The real work of response is the ability to choose from a repertoire of response types that which is most appropriate for the particular text, writer, and moment in the conversation. Readers need to be able to decide when a writer needs to hear an interpretation of her work, when it is appropriate to tell a writer how the text affected them, and when it would be appropriate to suggest a change. Writers need to be able to choose to let the conversation proceed so that they can hear the reader’s responses independently of their intentions, or to intervene because the response has ceased to be useful. Knowing the strategies is important, but knowing when to apply them is equally important. Students need to practice negotiating ownership, they need to look to their peers for strategies for reading and responding to writing, and they need to be allowed to create their own rituals. In order to do these things, students need to be allowed to have real conversations, complete with the disharmonies, tensions, false starts, and tangents typical of real talk.

In the introduction, I wrote that use of peer response groups in
classrooms assumes that writers responding to one another in groups will help one another become better writers. At this point, I wonder if we should just leave it at this: writers responding to one another in groups will help one another be writers. It is the doing of poetry that is important to the members of this group. One of the most important implications of this study is that we need to look beyond ways that people learn the skills involved in becoming literate, and even beyond the ways that people acquire literacies; we need to look at the ways that literacy is practiced. We need more research into non-classroom groups of people gathering to read and write together. We also need to investigate what it is that students do when they gather in semi-autonomous groups. Research like Tom Newkirk and Pat McClure's study of reading groups in a first and second grade classroom, which examines the actual behavior of students involved in literate activities in groups, can help us uncover some of the ways that people practice literacy, in the contexts of groups. We need to look at what actually happens in writing groups in and out of classrooms.
CHAPTER SIX

SEEING AND RE-SEEING

The day my batteries all died I had two interviews scheduled, one with Hildred at her house, and one with Brock, at his. Hildred and I had a wonderful conversation – we talked about her poems and the group’s response, but we also talked about her teenage sons and her family. It felt like a conversation between friends. Unfortunately, when I am conversing with my friends, I sometimes let things slip my mind; I was listening intently to Hildred’s account of her feelings at being invited to read poetry in public for the first time, when she interrupted herself and pointed at my tape recorder. “Is that red light supposed to be on?” she asked.

The red light was supposed to be on – it was the battery indicator – but it wasn’t supposed to be flashing on and off like it was doing. I fooled with the recorder a bit, but it was clearly not going to function any longer. And I hadn’t brought any extra batteries. I laughed, embarrassed, and started taking better notes, hoping my tape recorder hadn’t been out for the whole wonderful discussion.

I was even more embarrassed later, as I walked back up Hildred’s driveway to ask if she had jumper cables – I had left the lights on, and my car battery had died, too! We pushed my car over closer to hers and tried to jump it, but it didn’t take. I borrowed her phone to call Brock and tell him I was going to be late. We tried to jump the car again, and it didn’t take; Hildred’s older son arrived home, but he couldn’t get it to start, either. So I borrowed the phone again, called Brock and cancelled, and called my
husband to come drag me and my non-functioning car home. Later, Brock told me if I had let him know what the problem was, he would have insisted on coming to look at the car himself. One thing this research has taught me is that research is messy. People kept telling me that about qualitative research, but I thought it was because we were looking at such complex things: cultures, human beings, art. Now I realize it's not only messy because of the complexities and subtleties of what I am studying, but also just because life is messy.

This chapter will discuss some of the ways I have tried to negotiate both kinds of messiness; I will discuss the qualitative methods I used to collect and analyze my data, untangle some of the ethical issues involved in doing research in a poetry group I was previously a member of, and try, through the telling of one last story about a poem and the group's response to it, to uncover some of the roles I have played over the course of this study. Van Maneen, in his book Tales of the Field, tells us that the researcher's "confession" is an increasingly common feature of qualitative research reports, an attempt to disclose the researcher's subjective stance so that readers may take that subjectivity into account. This chapter, then, is my confession.

I gathered the data for this study over ten months, after I had been a participating member of the group for a year and a half. I interviewed all active participants of the group at least once, and then interviewed several people a second time, to focus on particular meetings. Interview questions were framed after a review of transcripts of the meeting and of my notes and any written documents collected. I recorded the interviews (as well as I could) and transcribed the tapes, as well as taking notes. Generally, interviews took place in settings other than the poetry group meetings;
several people invited my into their homes, and I met with others at restaurants in Durham, or in classrooms or lounges on campus.

Our interviews were informal conversations, a chance to talk about poetry in a way that the more formal structure of our group didn’t usually allow. We often strayed way beyond the boundaries of my prepared questions; Hildred and I talked about our childhoods, which were very different, and our experiences as graduate students. Ralph used the opportunity of our interview do a lot of thinking of his own about poetry and response. Brock shared drafts of poems, his own and Don’s, during one of our interviews. I felt tremendously lucky to have such articulate and interested informants, as well as friends who would try to jump start my car or volunteer to pick me up when I needed a ride.

I also taped ten meetings over a period of six months, and then indexed and transcribed the tapes. The notes I took during meetings changed over the course of the study. I was already in the habit of taking notes during meetings, because it helps me focus on what I am hearing, and because some of the poets appreciated having a written record. At first I continued to take the same kinds of notes as I always had: I recorded, on the draft of the poem, changes which were suggested and positive comments respondents made about specific lines, and at the bottom of the page, positive comments on the poem overall and my own reaction to the poem. As I began to listen to and transcribe meeting tapes, it became clear that notes which moved chronologically through the discussion would be more helpful for my study, and that I needed to record more than just the suggestions for changes. I slowly switched to a different format: I still took notes on my copy of the poem under discussion, but I recorded all
comments made in a column next to the poem, in the order that the comments were made, and I identified each speaker by his initials.

I'm not sure if the change in format was useful for the poets, who always received a copy of my notes; although several people mentioned that the notes were a useful record, they didn't mention the change in format, nor did they complain that, instead of receiving the notes at the end of a meeting, as they used to do before I became a researcher as well as a participant of the group, the notes now arrived by mail a few days later, so that I would have a chance to xerox copies for myself. But my worry over whether the changes in my notes would disturb the group was indicative of my situation as participant observer. As I collected data for this study, I needed to balance my old role as a fairly junior member of the group with my new role of researcher. Murray Wax claims that fieldworkers must “learn to observe, to participate, and to share while being able to record, compare and analyze, thus moving back and forth between being associated with their hosts and with their disciplines.” He goes on to claim that “the tension is visible in the fact of keeping fieldnotes, for by this activity, the researchers are detaching themselves from their experiences and converting these into data which they examine from the perspective of a member of their discipline” (273). My own situation differs from this description. For one thing, instead of learning to participate while being able to observe, I needed to learn to observe, while continuing to participate as I had been doing for some time. Moreover, Murray Wax describes a researcher's field notes as tangible sign of a move to the researcher's role; in my case, my field notes were only a modification of an activity which had already been a normal part of my role as participant.
Because of my previous experience and on-going participation in the group, I had to continuously work to achieve a critical distance from the group. Throughout the months I gathered data, I kept a research journal to help me identify and articulate my own role in the group, and gauge the emotional reactions I was having, as well as assumption I brought in to the study and themes I saw emerging through the research. This journal, in fact, was where I first wrote about the changes in my notes and the worry they caused me. In the end, however, I achieved the kind of critical distance necessary for me to write about the poetry group only through actual distance, in both time and space. I stopped attending group meetings; leaving the field allowed me the time to reflect on what I had found there, and to begin to render a portrait of the group.

Analyzing the Data

Geertz has written that the ethnographer's job is "...first to grasp, then to render..." (10, Interpretation). As someone who has used writing to make meaning throughout most of my life, it did not surprise me at all to discover that much of what could be called data analysis happened for me through writing. I often grasped as I rendered. In addition to the those data collection techniques which involve writing – field notes, research journals, and memos – the rendering itself was a task which involved revision after revision of the way that I saw the events I was trying to describe. The writing of the text was divided into three phases (with, of course, innumerable smaller dead-ends and abandoned forays.) The first phase was a kind of meaning-making through story-telling, wherein I
wrote narrative accounts of "poetry events." I defined a "poetry event" as the sharing of one poem by one poet during the evening's meeting plus the group's conversation about and around that poem. The transcripts of these events, even coded and re-coded, were still raw data, and most of the themes emerged from that data only after I had wrestled the "poetry event" into a readable form, a narrative with beginning, middle, and end, which, of course, left much of what had actually happened out of the story altogether, and instead included only what my writerly instincts (or researcher instincts?) told me I needed to tell the story of that particular emerging theme.

I did code my transcripts, but what I found was that my coding systems continually broke down. I coded with a color scheme once, and with key words at other times; my key words changed as my understanding about what was happening changed. Constructing narrative descriptions of what was happening produced codes as often as coding produced outlines for narrative descriptions, and I alternated between the two ways of analyzing the data, eventually abandoning the coding system in favor of the narrative as I reached the end of the process (see also Newkirk, Narrative Roots; Brodkey).

The second phase was to draft the whole middle section of the dissertation, Chapters One through Four, in which I tried to construct a coherent portrait of the group. Geertz claims that trying to explain social phenomena by placing them into local frames of knowledge requires "making detours and going by sideroads" (6, Local Knowledge), and that the essay is a convenient form for finding these detours of thought. I see my four-chapter portrait of our group not as a linear unfolding of a story, but as a four-part essay. The two interior chapters of this portrait are shaped like
case studies, in that they focus on individual poets and their vision of what it is that we are up to. But as I was writing those chapters, I often found myself moving between the stories of the individuals and the stories of the "poetry events" I had already constructed. This is the phase of the writing during which I realized that I could not tell the stories of the individuals without also telling the stories of the group, any more than I could tell the group story without constructing case studies of individuals. So, although I originally envisioned the case studies of the individual as being embedded in the portrait of the group, I eventually began to see that it was also true that the portrait was embedded in the case studies.

The third phase of writing was a revision of the middle chapters, with particular attention to creating a conversation between the story or portrait I had created and various theories about response and group work, particularly my own theories and those of my fellow group members. I also wrote the first draft of the introduction, moving back and forth between that draft and the revisions I was making to the portrait. Geertz claims the "culture explainer" has to "tack between...two sorts of descriptions – the increasingly fine-comb observations ...and increasingly synoptic characterizations...in such a way that, held in the mind together, they present a credible, fleshed-out picture of a human form of life" (10, *Local Knowledge*). The dialectic between the small details of our conversations about poems and the larger questions and ideas I tried to address in the introduction was the productive engine of this last phase of data analysis. And Geertz's notion that what the critic does in her attempt to illumine a poem is similar to what the "culture explainers" (9) do to interpret culture may also explain one of my predominate, troublesome, experiences while writing this dissertation: I often felt a most uncomfortable sense of
interpreting interpretations of interpretations of interpretations. Writing interpretive descriptions of our group's interpretive discussions of the poets' interpretations of their experiences, and then trying to step back and uncover my multiple roles as researcher, respondent, and poet, I often felt like I was standing between two metaphysical mirrors, watching my interpretations receded into infinity.

As I went back through the last time, I cut out a tremendous amount of material – this may seem more truly a writing task, and less an analytical one, and in a way it is: I was trying to make the text more readable, easier to get through. But the process of cutting was also a process of developing my confidence in my data, becoming aware that I had multiple examples of a concept or phenomena, too many to ask my readers to slog through. Where I had three examples, I could cut two, confident now that I had been able to triangulate, and only then able to move on to choosing the example which would contribute to the most credible interpretation.

**The Obligations of Authorship**

In addition to the choices I made between multiple examples, however, I had to make another kind of choice as I told this story. I had to choose what information to withhold, or which stories not to tell. Throughout the process of writing the portrait of the group I have had to fight the urge to invent what one friend and reader called "happy endings." As a participant, I am invested in protecting the integrity of the group and in maintaining harmony. I naturally want to tell stories which make me and my friends look good, make us look like we know what we are doing
and we are doing it well. In addition, I have wrestled with what Newkirk has called "the ethics of bad news" ("Seduction and Betrayal in Qualitative Research"); I did obtain formal consent from the individuals in the group to do this study, but, as Newkirk points out, formal consent does not necessarily prepare people to hear possible negative findings. "Because we present ourselves as completely well-meaning" in the formal consent process, Newkirk writes, "we find ourselves in moral difficulty when we write and include "bad news" in our final rendering" (3). I have an obligation to my readers to present the group in all its complexity, but I also have an obligation to protect my informants by not telling stories that might hurt them.

My obligation to my informants stems from my role as researcher. Wax points out that the ethnographer of a small town can ask questions or start conversation which "normal residents" cannot, because of the restraints of "etiquette" (276). As a "scholar requesting enlightenment," I raised issues during interviews which never surfaced during the normal interactions of the group, and, moreover, individual group members told me things I might never have heard had I not stepped into the role of researcher, perhaps making it, as Wax puts it, "their business to instruct" me about issues and information they thought would be relevant to my research. When I became privy to this type of information, which I would not have heard in my role of group member, I became obligated to treat that information in a responsible manner.

Moreover, my obligation in this particular setting was complicated by the ways that I gained entry into the research site. Corrine Glesne discusses the traditional differentiation, in ethnographic studies, between "rapport" and "friendship." Rapport is necessary for the researcher to
gather information; the researcher establishes rapport so that her informants will trust her enough to disclose information she needs. "In rapport relationships," Glesne writes, "I trust others to tell me their true feelings and beliefs, and they trust that in taking their words I will do them no harm." According to Glesne, the establishing of rapport, although its aim is trust, entails deception, misunderstanding, and exploitation.

Because I was a participant on the scene before I was an observer, it was perhaps even easier for me to gain my informants' trust; in several cases, I was already a friend, and it may have been overly easy to present myself as someone to whom it would be safe to disclose information.

Newkirk insists that discussion of the possibility of "bad news" should be raised at the start of a study, although that "bad news" may be somewhat hypothetical at first, and that the researcher "is then obligated to raise issues as they occur, and not to avoid discussing them" (19). During interviews with my informants, I did not find them adverse to hearing the bad news, despite the fact that the formal consent process did not include mention of possible problems or issues, such as conflicts between group members. The ability to be reflective, and critical, is part of the revision process, a process that my informants believe in completely – they are not adverse to revision of the group's process, either, and if critical attention to the group's conversation might allow us to revise, re-see, what we are up to, they are probably all for it. In fact, while listening, again and again, to the tapes of our interviews, I have found that the other members of the group have been ready to express their doubts, to identify the conflicts, and to tell the stories with less than happy endings. In addition, several of the group members who have read the text have told me that it would be
interesting to discuss some of the implications of the study within the group.

According the Wax, gaining consent is a process, not an event, part of the developing relationship between the informants and the researcher. The consent process Wax describes requires the researchers “always sustain their presence as welcome guests and responsible adults. If they are wise,” he continues, they “will communicate as much as possible – given the distortions of language, culture, and worldview –concerning their hopes and intentions” (275). As they talk, they find the language with which to share the goals of the research and the themes being uncovered. Because I share, as an active member of the group, in the group’s language, culture and worldview, and because several members of the group also belong to the discipline I am coming from, I mistakenly assumed that I would have no trouble with the type of on-going consent as process which Wax describes – sharing my hopes and intentions with my informants, and I had hoped that soliciting multiple interpretations of the data, one of the things Newkirk suggests to mitigate the ethical problem of “bad news” in qualitative research, would be fairly easy in this setting. What I discovered, though, was a dynamic specific to this group which left me feeling isolated with my hopes and intentions, my goals of polyvocality frustrated. It is simply not considered appropriate, in the group I studied, to spend much time discussing theories of reading, writing, or poetry. We occasionally mention teaching methods prior to a meeting’s start, as when Brock and Don and I discussed portfolios in May while Brock and I were both immersed in grading for our courses, but in general, the poetry group comes together as a place for doing poetry, not for doing theory.
As individuals, we speak the language of theory, but in the group, that language is excluded, because writing and reading poetry is considered more important than talking about writing and reading poetry. So, despite the fact that my interests were shared, and my sophistication often exceeded, by my informants, I also had to make an adaptation while communicating in my new role as researcher — I had to respect the ways of doing things in the group. I discovered that just as the group was willing to respond to my poems but anxious to protect my ownership of those same poems, they were willing to help me with my research, curious about the results and interested in the questions, but insistent on my ownership of the text and interpretation. I see the ownership of this study, though, as somewhat different from the way the group defines the ownership of the poems we are discussing. We work hard, when responding to poems, to protect the author's right to the final interpretation, to decide what the poem means. The group has granted me the right to final interpretation, as well; as I render the portrait of the group and discuss the implications of the study, I am deciding what the data means. But this ownership, in addition to being a privilege, is also a responsibility.

A Found Poem

When I brought my poem Facts and Circumstances to share with the group in September, I had a lot of things on my mind. For one thing, this meeting at Hildred's house would be the last one I was going to tape; I was ending my stint as researcher and observer for a while, to take time to step back and analyze my data. I knew I was going to miss the group, so I
wanted to enjoy myself at this meeting, but I was also worried about whether or not I had "enough stuff" yet. Had I recorded enough meetings, done enough interviews? Would I find anything to say? I worried that there was something I needed to get out of this last meeting, some key element that would make everything fall in place. So I was determined, as I put my researcher hat on for one more meeting, to pay close attention. I had my tape recorder ready, with two blank tapes and extra batteries.

At the same time, I was fretting about my poem. It was a new poem, and, although I had written nine drafts, I had written them quickly, and I wasn't happy with the result yet. The poem was a "found poem," constructed with words I had found on a United States Air Force document labelled "Facts and Circumstances," in a three-inch-thick folder of papers my sister had forwarded me, about the events on the day my father was shot down over Laos more than twenty years before. I had never written a found poem before, and I was worried about whether this kind of work qualified as poetry. In my process notes I had written, "If my grandmother or cousins read this poem, would they ask, 'why is this poetry?' Why is this poetry?" I intended to ask the poets in the group what they thought about found poems, about whether, in general, they "count," and about whether they thought this found poem, in particular, was working as anything other than a transcript, slightly modified, of the original USAF document.

And I was also fretting about the events which had prompted me to write the poem in the first place. Right after my sister Cathy had forwarded the file, newly released by the government under recent disclosure laws, she had called to tell me that there was new information: the Air Force had called to tell her they had tentatively identified the site where our father's plane had crashed, apparently nose-first into a mountainside. There were
no remains above-ground; in fact, there was so little left at the scene that they had identified the plane by the type of seat-belt buckles found. But they were planning on excavating the site, and might discover actual proof of our father's death.

Cathy and I have both written for years about what it is like to have a father Missing in Action. I asked her how she was feeling about this new discovery, and she told me she didn’t know yet. She didn’t know how to feel. Her answer made me aware that I didn’t know how to feel either, but I turned, as I often do, to writing to help me figure it out.

Facts and Circumstances

Lieutenant Colonel Donald A. Luna departed Ubon Airfield, pilot of an O-2A aircraft, on a forward air controller mission over Laos. There were widely scattered rain showers, with a cloud ceiling at 4,000 feet. Visibility was over six miles.

A routine report was received from Colonel Luna at 0653; his position was 15 miles southwest of Tchepone, over a mountainous and densely forested area. His next contact was to have been made at 0800. That report was not received.

At approximately 0825, a pilot who was proceeding to Colonel Luna's operational area received some clicking on his ultra high frequency radio. He called and requested Colonel Luna give two clicks if he was receiving him. Two clicks were received.

The pilot told Colonel Luna that if his only problem
was radio, to give two clicks.
Two clicks were heard. Colonel Luna was then asked
if he was returning to base and again
two clicks were received.

When Colonel Luna’s aircraft had not returned
by the time its fuel supply
would have been exhausted, he
and his aircraft
were declared missing.

A faint beeper signal
was received at about 1600 hours.
There were no other signals heard.

— Andrea Luna

I don’t have a transcript of the poetry group’s response to this poem, despite my extra batteries and my determination to do a good job as researcher during this last taped meeting. I became very involved in the discussion and didn’t notice when the tape reached the end of Side A. But even though I don’t have a tape of the conversation, I am painfully aware that during the discussion, I interrupted everyone constantly. Although I usually try to sit back and listen to the group talk about my poems, this time I couldn’t get myself to back out of the conversation. I watched myself doing it as it was happening, but I didn’t stop.

The group agreed that the strongest part of the poem was the clicks; Brock said that they were “eerie.” I already knew that, and said I thought so, too. When Ruth suggested I add dialogue, I told her I’d already thought of that. I didn’t mean to reject her suggestion; I think I was excited that she had ideas for the poem which I had already had, because I thought perhaps that meant she understood how I felt, how I was wrestling with the scene. We debated deleting or changing the last line, There were no other signals heard. Brock said he thought I should keep the whole thing, even the last
word which sounded a little awkward, because it implied that there may have been signals which were not heard. I found that I didn’t really care whether or not the poem needed that last line; it was far more valuable for me to hear that Brock understood it was incredibly important that there may have been signals which were not heard.

I thought at first, as I watched myself make everyone uncomfortable by interrupting again and again, that perhaps I wasn’t ready to hear response to this poem. I now think that not only was I ready for response, I was anxious for it. This group has helped me to redefine response to include the things I was looking for that evening: I wanted to know what my poem was saying to these people, and I wanted to know that they could hear me through the poem, hear the turmoil in my heart. I didn’t particularly want help writing or rewriting the poem, I just wanted it to be received, and I wanted their response to signal to me that it had been. This new definition of response, which includes the reception of the poem, the acknowledgement of one person’s signal by another person or group of persons, is probably the one result of this study which is the most significant for me.

That’s not to say that I don’t continue to value the other components of response; even despite my resistance to hearing suggestions for changes to Facts and Circumstances, for example, the evening’s conversation did enable me to revise, or perhaps I should say to continue writing, the poem. Brock had one suggestion which was just right, which moved me from the stuck place that I was in towards another draft that would help me to figure out more about how I felt about the plane and more about how I wanted the poem to be. I had written a note to myself after I’d finished the latest draft of
the poem which described my fascination with the specifics in the poem, and my frustration with its voice, or actually its lack of voice:

How surprising it is to me that Daddy went down, not just years ago, but at 8:30 in the morning. It was morning. He'd been flying around since 5:00 in the morning, and then it was 8:30 or thereabouts and the radio didn't work, and he probably got to see the sunrise, and had coffee, and it was morning! and that blows me away. But this draft, even with its emphasis on time, doesn't express any of my blown-awayness. It's cold. Like my stereotype of the military report. The report isn't actually that cold, but my found poem is. But I'm thinking that what Maurine [my grandmother] ... must have read was cold, because to her the author of that report was the USAF, and, as I told my class the other day, groups don't have voices (people do.) There was no people (I imagine) for her; only the USAF, leaking what information it would. I could write a draft that put the voice of my commentary – the coffee and the sunrise and the speculation – in alternating stanzas with the report words. I have an instinct that wouldn't work.

I wanted to somehow move away from the impersonal government document without losing the sense that the tiny, "objective" facts it doled out so parsimoniously hid a much larger story. I tried my own idea, but only got as far as two stanzas:

_Facts and Circumstances_

_At 0502, Colonel Luna left Ubon Airfield._
_There were widely scattered rainshowers,_
a cloud ceiling at 4000 feet. Visibility was over six miles.

It was morning, not quite dawn. The rain drizzled on yesterday's mud, and as he headed toward the plane, he swallowed the last of a cup of bitter coffee. The clouds shifted overhead.

_(partial draft)_

It's not normal procedure to bring partial drafts to the poetry meeting, but I did bring this fragment with me. After we had talked about
the completed draft, I told the group my worries about the voice of the draft, and read the fragment out loud. Brock suggested that the alternate voice, the one which is describing what I imagined might have happened, might ask questions. It was a brilliant idea; questions, after all, have been mostly what my family and I have been left with for these twenty-odd years. We discussed having the voice start with description, as I've done in the fragment, and then over the course of the poem become less and less certain, asking more and more questions. With that one suggestion I was able to re-see the possibilities of the poem, and, later, to move back into the text and revise.

I suspect that bringing *Facts and Circumstances* to the poetry group was my way of telling the people at the meeting not just the story of the crash — they'd heard that before, in other poems — but also the newer event: the site of my father's crash-landing being discovered. All that week, I had been telling everyone important to me what had happened; not having decided yet how I felt about it, I repeated the story over and over again. But when we met at Hildred's, I didn't say anything about it until after we talked about the poem. These people were important to me, too, but because the relationships we have built have been mostly around texts, it was through a text that I was able to let them know that something momentous was going on with me. Perhaps I was impatient with some of their comments, even though they were very insightful, simply because they were not comments on more recent events. This adds another dimension to my new view of what response is: good response includes the reception of the text, and the revision of the text, but it also allows for the on-going development of a relationship between people, which transcends the text.
As I write this last description of a “poetry event,” it occurs to me that the way I have interpreted the conversations of our group throughout this study is similar to how I write a “found poem.” The liberties I took with the text of the Air Force document to construct Facts and Circumstances, and make its meaning come clear are analogous to the liberties that I take with the text that is our conversations. I have to choose what to include and what to leave out. I have to recognize and negotiate my own prejudices and preconceptions. My roles as writer, group participant, respondent, friend, and poet affect the gathering and analysis of my data, and the construction of the final text, as well as my roles as teacher, student of literacy and composition studies, and researcher (Peshkin). I have had to find a voice which negotiates between what I’ve asked and what I’ve found. In a way, the portrait of the group is one long found poem.

After this last meeting, it was even clearer to me that the different roles I have played while doing this study have impacted every action I took and every interpretation I’ve made. The writer-me went into the meeting thinking questions about “found poetry” and its legitimacy; wanting to ask the group what they thought; I interpreted the comments of people who told me that the group helps them to learn about what poetry is through that experience. The me who uses writing to try and make meaning and sort out big issues also went into the meeting preoccupied with her own concerns, wanting the group to hear her poem and respond to her as a human being; this is the same me who thought she recognized what Brock meant when he told me he valued “human response,” and who observed later that perhaps Jim was still sorting out his feelings about his grandmother when he wrote Nowadays. The me who is a friend to the people in this group, and wanted them to know news about my father’s crash site is also the me who
interpreted Don's response to that poem, when he told Jim, "I know you're
going to do something [to help your grandmother]." The researcher me
watched at this meeting, observing me interrupting other people, hearing
how they smoothed over the abrupt spots in the conversation caused by
those interruptions, cringing when I let the tape recorder run out.

I went into this study with two interlocking sets of questions which
arose from two of the roles I play: writer and teacher. As a writer, I wanted
to examine more closely the act of response. As a teacher, I wanted to
discover what I could about the ways that writers responded to other
writers so that I could structure more effective peer writing workshops in
my classrooms. Of course, a specific, qualitative study of writers in one
situation is not generalizable to other settings. But Geertz, in his
*Interpretation of Cultures*, addresses the question of whether, though not
generalizable, a study like this one might be useful to think with.

The methodological problem which the microscopic nature of
ethnography presents is both real and critical. But it is not to be
resolved by regarding a remote locality as the world in a teacup or
as the sociological equivalent of a cloud chamber. It is to be
resolved — or, anyway, decently kept at bay — by realizing that
social actions are comments on more than themselves; that where
an interpretation comes from does not determine where it can be
impelled to go. Small facts speak to large issues, winks to
epistemology, or sheep raids to revolution, because they are made
to.

The conversations of our poetry group "speak to" the larger issues
involved in conversations between writers and readers in classrooms and
out. The study I've done has implications for the way we look at response,
the way we look at what it means for a writing group to be successful, the
ways we structure writing groups in classrooms, and for the ways that we
define what it means to be literate.
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