POINT TO POINT

PARAPHRASE, CONTEMPORARY POETRY, AND LITERARY SYLLABUSES IN JAPAN.

Richard Cauldwell

Allan Hirvela's article (*JALT Journal* 9.2) on the integration of language and literature teaching raises interesting questions of which I should like to address three:

—Can poetry be taught using paraphrases?
—In what way is poetry suitable for literature courses in Japan?
—What should teachers and students do with poems?

1. Can Poetry Be Taught Using Paraphrases?

Alan Hirvela (1988) implicitly excludes poetry from the type of treatment he suggests for non-native speakers studying literature:

> Poetry, by its very nature, cannot really be simplified within the same literary form or genre. To be sure, poems are simplified through paraphrasing in prose form; however, comparisons of these vastly different representations of the text would be difficult. . . . (p. 140)

I will argue that teaching students to **create** first a spoken, then a written paraphrase of a poem, can be an effective basis for a literature course. Any commentary on a poem, by a literary critic or a high-school student, involves elements of paraphrase, and learning how to paraphrase is an important literary skill.

My goal, in my English literature courses at a national university in Japan, is not to compare two already prepared versions of the same text; rather it is to help the students to analyze a poem and produce a paraphrase of it. This paraphrase will consist of talk and writing about the structure, patterns, and meanings of the poem. A second aim is to teach the students a strategy for paraphrasing which they can apply to other poems.

2. How Suitable Is Poetry?

There seems to be a general assumption that poetry is "difficult" for native, and therefore "too difficult" for non-native speakers. However, it is my experience that many poems by some contemporary and recent poets make ideal texts for literary courses at university level in Japan.

Many of them are short (under thirty lines) with relatively easy vocabulary, addressing themes common to the literatures of many cultures (love, growth, loss). They are in regular stanzas, have rhyme schemes, and are not dense with metaphor (e.g. Seamus Heaney's "Scaffolding," where a building under construction is a metaphor for a developing relationship). They have a readily visualizable physical or psycho-social setting (e.g. Tony Harrison's "Book Ends," in which a bereaved husband and son sit in front of a fire). Finally they often are written in everyday speech (e.g. the questions in Causley's "Whatever Happened to Lulu"; or Auden's colloquialisms in "The More Loving One").

Poems with these characteristics can be analyzed and paraphrased by the students in a ninety-minute session. Vocabulary problems can be overcome within half an hour; then literary qualities and overall meaning may be addressed. Each lesson can thus be free-standing and independent, yet be one of a series which contributes to overall course objectives. This flexibility is vital in situations such as mine where special lectures and other requirements made of students mean that their attendance over a three-month, twelve-session course is unpredictable.

One argument against using such recent poems is that they are not yet part of the literary canon: Posterity has not made its judgment on this body of work; knowing about this small corpus of contemporary British poetry will be of little use to the students, even those with literature majors. Against this one has to weigh the advantages of providing students with a more direct experience of primary, if not canonical, texts.

Poems that have proved both popular and useful for my students include Derek Mahon's "Leaves" and "The Snow Party" (enjoyed for its mention of Japan); Tony Harrison's "Long Distance" and "Book Ends". These and other suitable poems can be found in Morrison and Motion (1982). A second anthology is Maley and Moulding (1985), which contains poems by Charles Causley, Seamus Heaney, Eleanor Farjeon, and others. Journals and publications such as the *Times Literary Supplement* are other good sources.

3. What Should Teachers and Students Do With Such Texts?

Even with appropriate poems, the students will gain little if the teacher then overwhelms them with inappropriate discourse such as

long difficult lectures or written critiques of the poems. Because students must understand poems before they can produce a paraphrase, the discourse with which poems are approached has to be more accessible than the poems themselves.

The most accessible talk and writing is that which the students produce themselves. In order to get students to produce this language, I favor having students in horseshoe-shaped groups of five (I have done this with up to forty people) with the open end of the group towards me. Thus we can switch from lecture-mode to intra-group discussion very quickly. I give short lectures of about three minutes, or, if longer, broken up into two or three chunks of about three minutes in length. I then ask each group, under the direction of a group leader, to check if they understood the content of the lecture, and come back to me with questions if they feel they do not. I usually direct them to speak in English: occasionally I offer them a choice of either Japanese or English, if the target concept is beyond the English ability of some. The lecture might consist of an introduction to the poet or to the literary qualities being addressed in that session (rhyme, rhythm, metre).

The groups then start to analyze the poem, and if they have not done vocabulary work on the poem beforehand, they check words they feel they do not understand. Once students understand the poem word-for-word, we address its structure, its patterns, and overall meaning. I give students tasks on the poem. In the early stages of a course the task I give is very specific: "count the number of words which have prominent /s/ sounds" ("Book Ends"); "How many syllables in each line?" ("Scaffolding"). Later on, as students become more aware of the variety of possible literary patterns, the task I give is more general "Look for patterns"; "How do these patterns relate to the meanings?"; "Who is speaking to whom? What evidence does the poem provide for us to identify the persona of the poem or the person s/he is addressing?"; "Why this title?" ("Long Distance"; "Book Ends").

The sessions are driven by a four-stage cycle of:

(1) Lecturer setting the task
(2) Students performing the task
(3) Students reporting back
(4) Lecturer providing language.

Each cycle varies in length from two to a maximum of fifteen minutes. After each task is performed, the group leader reports on the group's findings (the leadership is passed to a different student for each cycle).

During the performance of the task and reporting back, the need for providing the students with the language necessary to talk about literature becomes apparent. Usually they are trying to express meanings for which they do not possess the appropriate language. This includes not only technical terms (iambs, assonance, alliteration, pararhyme, etc.) but also how to: refer to specific parts of the poem ("in the second line of the third stanza"); enumerate the properties of the poem ("this poem consists of 7 four-line stanzas rhyming ABAB"); comment on patterns and deviations from patterns ("all the lines of this poem contain 10 syllables, except for the last which contains 9"); and relate these structural statements to statements about the meaning of the poem ("the predominance of /s/ sounds in the poem suggests..."). In addition they need to learn strategies such as hedging: "one could even argue that... but..."; and could even learn how to use a metaphor from the poem to talk about the poem (a common strategy of critics; for an example see Thom Gunn, 1988).

4. Conclusion

To use a poem to generate "interesting discussion" is, arguably, appropriate for a language course. But literature courses demand that students learn things literary. Part of the purpose of any literary class must be to learn acceptable ways of discussing literature. I argue that teaching students how to paraphrase a poem, both in speech and writing, is indeed a worthy basic aim for any literature course.

It is not enough to expose students to literary works, to give students experience of poems and invite free discussion; for one thing, this makes testing very difficult. Students have to learn how to speak and write about poetry. In short, they have to learn not only how to experience literary discourse in the form of poems, they have to learn how to produce literary discourse in the form of descriptive and evaluative criticism and appreciation. Exposing students to literary works without showing how to produce literary discourse is to fall into the input-only heresy.

A literary syllabus should therefore include three types of discourse, all three of which have to be adjusted to the students' level: the texts themselves (in this case I have argued the case for contemporary poetry), the spoken discourse which is necessary for the analysis and commentary on the poems in class, and the written discourse necessary for assessment.

References

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