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Experiencing the poetry inherent in language as a tool in teacher education

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The opening module of the 2nd year of the 4-year Bachelor's degree in Waldorf Education at Freie Hochschule Stuttgart is described. The year is devoted exclusively to the additional subject chosen by the students and the article focusses on the group who have chosen L2 English. The intention in the module is to give the students an introduction to the history of the English language and its literature while at the same time beginning the development of their performative skills. This entails, on the one hand, setting the history of language in as wide a context as possible, in the process drawing upon the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Owen Barfield among others, and on the other, preparing a programme of poetry for performance. Within this broad context the process of preparation is described, and the mutual influences of the one upon the other highlighted.

1 The context

The Freie Hochschule Stuttgart offers a Bachelor's degree program in Waldorf Education with an additional focus on English as L2. The second year of this program is conceived as one of immersion in English. It contains modules on various areas and eras of literature in English and includes work on a full-length play as well as a cultural excursion to England or Ireland. The year culminates in oral and written examinations. In this article I focus on what occurs in the first seven weeks of this immersion year. The students I work with are usually in their twenties or thirties and are studying to be Waldorf class teachers who can also teach English.

2 First steps

Anyone whose ears are open to the spell that can be cast by the poetic music in language will always be on the look-out for the poems that possess this quality in large measure. Over years of sustaining this attention a repertoire of favourites is likely to have built up: works that we return to again and again, that we temporarily forget about and then rediscover like long-lost friends, and that, one way or another, will have become part of the substance of our life. If we should then find ourselves in the position of having to teach language, or even poetry, knowing who our favourite poets are, and which of their works are our favourite poems, will be an essential personal resource. To the pedagogical question – why are you working on this particular poem? – the best answer will then be, “because it's a part of my life.”

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In a school context, where there is likely to be a certain resistance, even hostility, to collections of words that initially produce the discomfort of incomprehension (in spite of their being ‘your life’), you might want to hold back your favourites for fear of ‘casting your pearls...’ – well, let’s not go there. In working at a tertiary level, however, this resistance will generally either not be there or perhaps may safely be ignored. So your favourites can all be on show. This has been very much the case with the groups of students I have been working with over the past few years.

Thus, on a certain morning, the students in the first weeks of their English immersion year can have the experience of walking into a classroom that has been transformed into a poetry anthology of which I am the editor. The criteria for inclusion of poems in the anthology are: (a) they are (some of) my favourites¹; (b) they are essential works in the canon of literature that the students need to know about; (c) they are short enough to fit into a performed poetry programme; (d) they come from many different literary periods and genres.

Over the next several days the students are given time (say 20-30 minutes on each day) to walk around the room, where the poems have been hung on different walls, sampling the anthology. There will be a wall consisting entirely of Shakespeare sonnets (selected for their ‘speakability’), of which the students have to select one, while from the rest of the exhibits on the other walls they choose the two they like best. (This will obviously only work for a relatively small group – if there are more than ten then it might be best to have them choose one sonnet and only one poem each).

From this starting point of choosing poems from the wall anthology begins an artistic process which offers far-reaching implications for the students’ lives as future teachers, and for their own personal development. This process represents the practical application of a theory of poetry based on a particular view of the history of language. So before describing this practical process, I would like to offer a sketch of its theoretical and historical underpinnings.

In doing so I am not suggesting that the theory needs to be taught before the practical application starts. Indeed, the thinking is that there should be a mutual enhancement between theory and practice, whereby the poetic qualities of the poems serve as phenomenological illustrations of the history, while the historical and morphological investigations deepen appreciation of the poetic qualities.

¹ There is an element of what might be called ‘destiny’ in this. These students have found themselves with me as their teacher and not someone else, and as there is no possibility of my choices being impartial here, it seems pointless, therefore, to make any attempt at impartiality. An element of this, however, does enter the picture with criterion (b). For instance, I have never been able to “warm” to the works of John Milton, but I nevertheless recognize that the students need to be given the opportunity to become acquainted with him, and so he may be included among the exhibits.

3 Background considerations: A theory of language and poetry

The main source of this background is a book that I first encountered many years ago and which has been a constant inspiration since. Having been first published in 1928, it might be thought to be hopelessly out-of-date, but because it was not written within the framework of any particular critical ‘school’ or ‘fashion’, it has stood the test of time very well, being every bit as relevant now as when it first appeared. The book is *Poetic Diction – A Study in Meaning* by Owen Barfield, a title which the author himself characterises as “unassuming” (Barfield, 1973, p. 14). But this modesty belies the far-reaching implications and concentrated eloquence of the text it designates. This becomes readily apparent in the preface to the second edition, where Barfield describes the book’s intentions as follows:

This book attempts to show how reflection on the poetic in language can lead to the perception that it flows from two different sources, one of these being the nature of language itself, especially in its earlier stages, and the other the individualized imagination of a poet; and how this in turn leads to an understanding of the evolution of consciousness. (Barfield, 1973, p. 29)

From this perspective on the poetic in language a theory of knowledge also flows, for this could also be regarded as a handbook on what Barfield calls “participant knowledge”, that is, knowledge construed as “consciously participating in what is”, rather than “seeing what happens and getting used to it” (p. 24), which is how he characterises Hume’s notion of knowledge. The key to the former idea is imagination, which, Barfield argues, is involved in any act of knowing. In the same preface Barfield expresses the position of imagination in relation to the poetic in language as follows:

Language is the storehouse of imagination; it cannot continue to be itself without performing its function. But its function is to mediate transition from the unindividualized dreaming spirit that carried the infancy of the world to the individualized human spirit, which has the future in its charge (Barfield, 1973, p. 23).

This “unindividualized dreaming spirit that carried the infancy of the world” (23), he will – in a later book (Barfield, 1957) – call “original participation”. This is a state of being which he has sought to characterise in many different ways. To our minds as they are constituted today it represents a form of consciousness virtually impossible to conceive of, except by a strenuous effort of imagination.² One of his most helpful characterisations is found in his book *History, Guilt and Habit* (1979). Here he puts it in terms of the relationship between perception and

² Whether the students make this effort is, of course, entirely up to them, but if they do, it may prove invaluable for their future lives as language teachers.

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thinking. He argues that on reflection it is clear that there can be no ultimate division between perception and thinking because they merge into each other. It is nevertheless possible and useful to distinguish them in order to understand our current consciousness. Barfield argues that in our modern sensibility we live very much in our thinking while there is much constructive activity in our perception of which we are normally unaware; whereas in the ancient state of original participation this was precisely the other way round. According to Barfield, we lived consciously in our perception to such an extent that the events of the world and the cosmos were effectively our thoughts – a state of affairs which, as experience, is now totally inconceivable. This is a condition of consciousness which has been remarked upon by other authors. Jean Gebser (1985) calls it the magical phase. Ernst Cassirer explains the relationship of this kind of consciousness to language,

The analysis of reality in terms of things and processes, permanent and transitory aspects, objects and actions, [does] not precede language as a substratum of given fact, but (...) language itself is what initiates such articulations, and develops them in its own sphere” (Cassirer, 1953, p.12).

As regards language, in *Poetic Diction* Barfield speaks of this phase as one of “concrete meaning” (Barfield, 1973, p. 79-80). He criticises the theory, common at the time, that posited a “metaphorical period” (p. 73-74) in the history of meaning when meanings were more figurative, indeed poetic. This theory envisages an era prior to this, when there were no metaphors at all, and language was a simple naming of physical things using names which were arbitrary inventions. Thus, they envisaged that a word like *spiritus* (Latin) or *pneuma* (Greek) originally meant simply ‘breath’, and when people needed a word for some conception like ‘principle of life’, the words *spiritus* or *pneuma* were pressed metaphorically into service to fill this role. Barfield argues, however, that such metaphorical conceptualisation belongs to a much later phase of the evolution of consciousness, since it depends upon a degree of detachment which simply did not exist in the magical phase of original participation. Furthermore, Barfield uses the word *pneuma* to create an inkling of what concrete meaning may have been like. *Pneuma* (and there are a host of words like it in other languages) in its ancient context meant not just breath, but also spirit, soul, wind and probably other things we cannot imagine. To be in a condition of consciousness which makes no distinction between wind, breath, soul and spirit is to be living inside a figurative, symbolic reality which we can now only get a hint of through metaphor. I have used the word ‘inside’ here, but this was, for Barfield, an inside that we would now call nature. It was through the activities of this nature that the poetry inherent in language originally took shape. Such is the world of undivided, unitary, concrete meanings.

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If in this world people (i.e., people in the state of original participation) lived in their perceptions and these footsteps of “nature” were their thoughts, then it is clear that they must have been, as it were, thought *into* them. In other words, if this is the source of the poetic in language, then language cannot have been our invention. Wilhelm von Humboldt is of the same opinion:

It is my overwhelming conviction that language must be viewed as having been placed in the human being; for it is not explicable as a product of reason in the clarity of consciousness. It does not help to grant thousands upon thousands of years for the purpose of its invention (...). For human beings to truly understand even a single word, not as a mere physical outburst, but as sound articulating a concept, language must already exist as a whole within them. There is nothing isolated in language; each of its elements only appears as part of a whole. As natural as it may seem to assume that languages develop, if they were also thus to be invented, this could only happen all at once. The human being is only human through language; in order to invent language, people would already have to have been human (Humboldt, 1963, pp. 2-3, author translation).

This holistic view of language is currently enjoying a revival. A recent book by Charles Taylor (2016) musters formidable arguments in support of it. He draws a major distinction between two main schools of thinking about language. One is the Hobbes-Locke-Condillac (HLC) approach, which starts from physical building blocks; the other is the Hamann-Herder-Humboldt (HHH), which is the foundation of the holistic view. Barfield would be firmly on the HHH side of the argument – as indeed is Taylor himself. For instance, referring to a passage where Humboldt compares language to “an immense web”, he says “Humboldt’s image of the web brings out the fact that our grasp of any single word is always situated within our grasp of language as a whole, and the multiple rules and connections that define it” (Taylor, 2016, p. 21). In a similar vein he remarks that;

a descriptive word, like ‘triangle’, couldn’t figure in our lexicon alone. It has to be surrounded by a skein of terms, some of which contrast with it, and some which situate it, place it in its property dimension, not to speak of the wider matrix of language in which the various activities are situated where our talk of triangles figures: measurement, geometry, design; and where description itself figures as one kind of speech act among others. This is what the holism of meaning amounts to (Taylor, 2016, p. 18).

Support for this Barfield-Humboldt approach comes from another quarter as well, from Jos Verhulst (2003) in *Developmental Dynamics in Humans and Other Primates*. Here he investigates the processes of so-called developmental retardation and pedomorphosis (also

known as neoteny, infantilisation or juvenilisation) as they express themselves in the evolution of the human bodily gestalt.

What we are talking about here is the timing of growth and the preservation or modification of form. The human form shows itself to be highly paedomorphic – i.e. juvenile or even embryonic – as a result of certain developmental processes having been held back. Furthermore, it is Verhulst's contention that all these developmental processes are centred upon the human capacity for speech. He deals with all this in considerable detail, which culminates in a flow diagram representing the "synergistic composition" of the human gestalt. The large number of paedomorphic traits dealt with in the book relate in various ways and by a multiplicity of pathways, to speech (p. 348). Examples of the most pertinent features are the catenary curve of the human jaw preserved from its general embryonic state³ (in fact it is one of our most paedomorphic features) and the morphology of the human *foramen magnum*⁴.

Lenneberg (as cited in Verhulst, 2003, p.275), for instance, remarked that this catenary curve in the human jaw is particularly favourable for the act of speaking. Taken together with all the other paedomorphic features Verhulst adduces in this connection, this forms the foundation of our articulate uprightness.

This strongly suggests that a capacity for language is both emergent within and integral to our morphology. Language did not need to be invented because it is embodied potential in the ecology of human development. The morphological language of nature thus seems to align with Humboldt's notion that a capacity for the production of spoken language has been 'placed in us'.⁵

³ Scott published a study (quoted in Verhulst, 2003), in which it was shown that in all mammals the jaw begins, in early foetal development, as a catenary curve. As growth proceeds, this form is then gradually modified into a host of different specialised forms, all except for the human gestalt, where the catenary shape is preserved right into adulthood. Thus the human jaw resists specialisation by preserving the foetal form, and it is this primordial, paedomorphic form which has been recognised as a prerequisite for speech.

⁴ This is the orifice at the base of the skull where the spine connects with the head. The angle the skull makes in relation to the head is called the cranial flexure, and in all mammals in early foetal development this angle will be found to be 90°, with the foramen magnum right in the centre of the base of the skull. Once again, in all mammals except humans this state of affairs is gradually modified by the ensuing growth processes. Thus, in adult humans the foramen magnum retains its central position and the cranial flexure remains 90° but varying due to specialisation in the forms of other mammals and primates. Once again, the radically paedomorphic human gestalt preserves the *primordial* form, resisting specialisation in the process, and the relationship between spine and skull which this form established is the ideal one for a bipedal upright organism. (Verhulst, 2003, p. 156)

⁵ Von Humboldt and Barfield arrived at their views by working into the past by philological investigation, while Verhulst's investigations work forwards from our evolutionary ancestry. While I obviously cannot prove it, these two perspectives seem to me to create an elegant convergence, which is also in tune with traditional views of language.

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If we now consider what the speech organs of this articulate upright creature were capable of, namely, of forming sound-shapes in air that carry meaning, we gain a new perspective on what Owen Barfield may have meant by ‘concrete meaning’. To have been consciously inside those primordial shapes and sounds must have been a formative, constitutive experience of unimaginable dimensions, of which we can only get an inkling now through such phenomena as sound symbolism. This is a concept put forward by Roman Jakobson (1979), and can best be illustrated (for English) by a simple exercise. The students are asked to make lists of words beginning with certain combinations of consonants. For instance, with “cl-” we get clump, clod, cluster, cling, clasp, clip, clam, clutch etc.; with “gl-” we get glow, gleam, gloom, glory, glitter, glisten etc. We can also try “fl-”, “dr-”, or “st-”. There will obviously be words that do not fit, but we would nevertheless seem to have here what could be called ‘meaning families’. The sound combination cl seems to express the experience of ‘adhesion’, while the sound-shape “gl-” would appear to carry a meaning to do with the experience of light.

Sound symbolism is also a feature of the given musical values of poetic language: just taking a few lines from two Shakespeare sonnets illustrates this well:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. (Sonnet 116)

Th’expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action. (Sonnet 129)

Did Shakespeare say to himself: I am talking about marital harmony, so I need lots of “m-”, or I am talking about evil, so I need lots of “s-”? No, there is a natural association between the sounds and the meanings.⁶ This, of course, runs contrary to the linguistic convention that there is no connection between sound and meaning, and while admittedly the phenomenon of sound symbolism appears to be nothing more than a semantic tendency, it nevertheless will be seen to be an important artistic principle in which theory and practice converge.

4 Practical application

The practical work of the poetry programme proceeds on the basis of such considerations. In connection with this Humboldt-Barfield-Verhulst perspective, the students will also have been given a condensed survey of the history of the Indo-European family of languages (as an epitome of language history in general), and this now flows into the practical work as well. The basic idea is that we put together a dramatised programme of poetry. This will incorporate a sequence of poems which the whole group will have learnt by heart (the techniques involved

⁶ Seamus Heaney, in his poem “Alphabets”, calls this “shape-note language” (Heaney, 1987).

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here will be described below), and which reflects the history of the English language. Thus it may run from an Anglo-Saxon extract (from the *Seafarer* or *Beowulf*) to Chaucer (from the *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* or *Troilus and Criseyde*) to something Elizabethan (a Shakespeare sonnet or poem by Donne), to something from the 18th or 19th century (Pope, Keats, Hopkins etc.) to something modern (most recently MacNeice, Heaney and Paul Matthews). I have also included examples of poems in a dialect, such as “To a Mouse” by Burns. Merged into this sequence, then, will be the poems the students have chosen themselves. These will also be learnt by heart, since the goal here is not just to sound the poems, but to own them as well, and I am working on the principle that, as in the history of our relationship to language, the ear precedes the eye. The idea is then to blend everything together into a seamless and coherent whole – otherwise we would simply have ‘one-damn-poem-after-another’. This is also very much in keeping with the holistic view of the history of language we will have been developing in parallel to the work on the poems.

Just as one word cannot stand in isolation, but implies, even symbolises, the whole of language, so the poems in our sequence cannot be allowed to stand alone, but must somehow each be a partial expression of the whole performance. Learning by heart is a prerequisite for this, and the process of doing this is greatly aided by the extent to which I, as the coach or director, know the things I bring – i.e., the historical sequence of poems – off by heart. It is also extremely useful if one of these poems happens to encapsulate the whole sequence, as does a poem called “Axe and Pen” by Paul Matthews (2011), which I have included the last two times I have put together such a performance. To be able to declaim such a poem straight off, as well as all the others in the historical sequence from *Beowulf* to MacNeice, is half the battle in persuading the students that they can do it too – even those who think they have a ‘bad memory’ and will not be able to do it.

In keeping with the principle of ear before eye⁷, I let the students hear each poem several times, homing in on the gaps in comprehension from hearing to hearing. Then, once they have got an initial grasp on what the poem is about, we begin learning it, piece by piece, by repetition. We will likely have several of these running in parallel and dovetailing over several weeks. One useful technique in this process is to use the communal memory – anyone says what comes next as they happen to remember it – and in this way we can collectively reconstruct it. At each repetition this becomes easier.

The eventual performance will incorporate both group and individual recitation and it is the poems in the historical sequence which are spoken together. Even before the students have

⁷ The students will eventually be given texts of the poems, but only after a few days of experiencing them solely through the ear.

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learned a particular poem by heart – because time is of the essence – we will begin working on it artistically. I would like to illustrate this process using the poem “Axe and Pen”, which, as already stated, is an epitome of the whole. The poem is based on an episode from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and runs as follows:

Axe and Pen (The mumblings of Humbaba)

Every time you pick up your pen
it twists into a blade that makes me tremble.

The groves fold beneath it, glades
where I would lie in the sun
as the deer approached unafraid
and licked my cheekbones.

I was the guardian there, each twig
my fingertip. My mind was in it, stretched
ten thousand leagues the seven ways.

I remember the day you swung my gate open
crying I will stamp my name in this place
lest oblivion take me.

Ah, but it was my place, my Country
of the Living. I had a woman’s eyes,
ten thousand this way that way, and you
shied yours away because I lacked alphabets.

I sent you visions, beautiful and wild;
but when you stepped close to the heart
of my abode you couldn’t keep your eyelids open

for you are a man mindful of your name,
and in my place an epithet soon loses itself
among the many syllables the leaves are busy with.

Humbaba is my name, murmur of winds, hubbub
of baby talk. All the time you are writing
I am the shadow at your shoulder saying
axe and pen, they share a handle.

I had seven splendours once.

They are lumbered now in the cold
catalogue of things; and as you sigh for fame
you seldom hear the rustlings of my country. (Matthews, 2011, p 14)

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It will be immediately apparent that the content of this poem effectively mirrors much of what was said about the background considerations out of which I work.⁸ Equally apparent is that it offers a rich store of poetic music to work with.⁹ This work is supported by movement and speech exercises. Language begins, historically and in the act of speaking, as movement, so I follow this in class by working on the principle that movement precedes speech. Accordingly, every practical lesson begins with a short gymnastic exercise followed by a short motto or verse. This verse is also a speech exercise, and I will come to what this entails in due course. Then a series of movement exercises follows, which may involve mirroring, spatial orientation, free movement, dramatic characterisation, improvisation etc. This serves both as a warm-up and as a preparation of the bodily instrument of speech. After this we warm up our voices by singing – perhaps a round or two, but also folk songs or any others that lend themselves to unaccompanied group singing. Some of them may involve – depending on the propensities of the group – two or three-part harmonies. This is an opportunity to provide the students with a stock of songs that might be useful for them as teachers in the future. It also acts as a ‘binding agent’.

Having done all this, we are now in a position to speak. One speech exercise I have used extensively brings speech into relation with one of a series of spatial orientation exercises, in which we explore the planes of space. There are three of them, and it is through our bodily relationship to these three planes that we hold ourselves upright (they correspond, in fact, to the circular canals in our organs of balance). One is discovered by holding our arms by our sides and then moving them in two identical arcs on either side of the body to meet at arm’s length above our heads. Thus we have described the plane that separates ‘in front’ from ‘behind’ (I shall call this 1). Another is found by raising our arms to shoulder height and moving them in arcs around the body (keeping our arms straight). This is the plane dividing ‘above’ from ‘below’ (2). The third can be envisaged by a semi-circle from the nose to between the feet, and from the back of the head to between the heels. This is the plane that divides ‘right’ from ‘left’ (3). Now that we know where they are, we can begin exploring them. For instance, we put ourselves with our awareness completely into plane 1 and walk around the room. Quite spontaneously the room is full of chieftains or kings. We make eye-contact with the others, greet them, surprised at the imperious voice we suddenly have. This plane has other qualities, of course, but this is often the initial experience of it. Then we do the same with planes 2 and 3 and we discover that in each one we quite spontaneously become a totally

⁸ For instance: “I was the guardian there, each twig my fingertip. My mind was in it, stretched ten thousand leagues the seven ways.” “I had a woman’s eyes, ten thousand this way, that way”; “...in my place an epithet soon loses itself among the many syllables the leaves are busy with” etc.

⁹ For instance: “twists into a blade”, “the groves fold beneath it”, “licked my cheekbones”, “murmur of winds, hubbub of baby-talk”, “cold catalogue of things” etc.

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different person, with an equally different mode of speaking. To cut a long story short, plane 1 is associated with the epic style of speaking, plane 2 with the lyric style and plane 3 with the dramatic. Before applying these to “Axe and Pen” we will have practised them through the medium of the speech exercise mentioned at the start of this paragraph. Everything in this work is multi-purpose – this particular exercise also gives practice on the enunciation and placement of vowels (it also happens to be rather wacky and great fun!).

Applying all this to “Axe and Pen” we can try out which ‘voice’ or style of delivery – 1, 2 or 3 – Humbaba is using at each stage of the poem. There is no right answer, it is a question of testing the waters and assessing what works. But this is just a first crude step in attempting to arrive at a rendering that does artistic justice to the poem. There are further refinements to be made.

Now we come to the motto/verse mentioned earlier. It entails four short stanzas, the first of which features stone, the second the rose, the third a wolf (and a goldfish), and the fourth human love in its widest sense.

Whose word could be truthful enough
for the stone to accept it?
Who could have beauty enough
To speak for the rose?
Who could be innocent enough to utter
What is at the heart of a wolf, or a goldfish?
Whose word could be grounded in love enough
To sound what is most deeply human? (Matthews, 1996, back cover)

In keeping with the principle of sound symbolism, what we now do, in turning this verse into a speech exercise, is attempt to imbue our speaking of the first stanza, i.e. the way we actively form the sounds, with the quality of stone, the second stanza with the quality of the rose and so on.

Now we can look for associations between sound and meaning and incorporate them into our speaking of “Axe and Pen”. This need not always affect whole phrases or sentences, but can be applied to individual words: for instance, twists, blade, glades, licked, twig etc. This may not always succeed, but being aware of such qualities and trying to apply them in passing will infuse artistic life into the rendition of a poem. And from a motivational point of view it is clear to the students that there is nothing arbitrary about making this attempt, for in doing so they are echoing something that has been inherent in language from the earliest times.

A further layer of refinement has to do with the relationship between speech qualities and gestures. Through improvisation exercises we take note of the kinds of gestures we make and thus, in a purely phenomenological way, we discover that there are different kinds of dramatic gestures. We explore these in relation to the six categories of gestures described by Rudolf

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Steiner in his lecture course on drama (Steiner 1981), and which he viewed as constituting, as it were, a “language of the soul.” When we then start to play with these gestures in connection with a speech exercise – for instance, a sentence from *Hamlet*: “Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue” (*Hamlet* III, ii, lines 1-2) – we discover, as with the planes of space, that in connection with each kind of gesture we speak in an entirely different way. This discovery is made by taking the gesture into the manner in which we form the sounds of the sentence. Each type of gesture has its speech quality and corresponding emotive expression. This can now be applied to our poem as well: Which gesture reflects Humbaba’s intentions at each stage of the poem? We can also overlay the poem with expressions of different emotions, for example, to try speaking it out of a feeling of anger, fear, sorrow, self-pity, love, despair etc. Out of a combination of all these different refinements, we arrive at a differentiated rendering of the poem. The final rendering might also involve parts of the poem being given to individual voices.

The upshot of all this is also, of course, that the students have been provided with a range of tools for approaching the artistic performance of *any* poem. We now set about doing this over a period of several weeks with the poems the students have chosen. Each student is coached individually in the presence of the others, and thus, on the one hand, they get to know their fellow students’ choices, and, on the other, gain first-hand experience of how each poem demands a different treatment. At the same time, they are gaining insight into the canon of English poetry – any of the poems chosen could be an entry-point for further exploration.

By this stage of the work we have a historical sequence of poems spoken by the group plus a series of individual poems all standing more or less side-by-side. The final stage of the work is now to bring them all together to form a seamless composite whole. This is where the exercises in free movement come to our aid. I will mention two of these. One I call the ‘diamond dance’, the other is called the ‘pivot dance’. Both will have been done early on in the process. Now, in the final stage when they are repeated the students are given the instruction to have a particular poem in mind each time they move. This does not involve the poems being spoken, rather it is an attempt to translate the poetry directly into movement, either one of the poems they speak together – in which case the movements would be interactive – or one of their individual poems. In this way we begin to discover expressive movements directly associated with our poetry programme.

All this flows into the work of joining everything together. The first thing is to work out an organic order – what should follow what? Then, as each poem is spoken, we try out moves, gestures, actions, tableaux that give each one an expressive and appropriate context. This might mean the non-speaking members of the group being frozen in attitudes that create a particular emotional atmosphere, or again, they might portray a group of children listening to

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a teacher, or any number of other possibilities. Having discovered that, the next thing is to find a fluid transition from one item to the next. As well as dramatic moves, this can also involve music, singing, natural sound effects etc. In this way the programme is gradually 'stitched together', and what was a disjointed series of apparently incompatible fragments becomes a composition every part of which seems inevitable. The students very quickly discover that taking the transitions seriously and performing them with as much commitment as the poems is the key to creating such a whole.

Now the programme can be given a title and rehearsed almost as if it were a play. The most recent one was called *Rustlings* and featured the following connected sequence of poems:

"The Hearth" (Paul Matthews)
"O blisful light" (Geoffrey Chaucer, from *Troilus and Criseyde*)
"Sonnet 30" (William Shakespeare)
"Sonnet 60" (William Shakespeare)
"I am" (John Clare)
"A little learning is a dangerous thing" (Alexander Pope, from *Essay on Criticism*)
"Entirely" (Louis MacNeice)
"Self" (Kathleen Raine)
"Inversnaid" (Gerard. M. Hopkins)
"The Roar of the Lion" (Ian McCallum)
From "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" (William Wordsworth)
"Axe and Pen" (Paul Matthews)
"Digging" (Seamus Heaney)
"Sonnet 27" (William Shakespeare)
"Sonnet 76" (William Shakespeare)
"The Forge" (Seamus Heaney).

5 Conclusion

The fact that this work culminates in a performance is very important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it creates a sense of closure and accomplishment, also a satisfying feeling of having given pleasure to the small, invited audience that witnessed it. Secondly, it strengthens cohesiveness and mutual appreciation among the members of the group. Thirdly, and probably most importantly, the goal of a performance acts as a strong motivational force upon the whole enterprise. This was mentioned by the students in their feedback (see Appendix for a list of the feedback questions). Generally, they found the prospect of learning a fairly hefty series of poems off by heart rather daunting. But the fact that it was necessary for the performance gave that extra kick that made the process less of a strain. The work of preparing each poem for performance, finding and highlighting its individual qualities in expressive ways also served to ease the process of learning by heart. When a certain word or phrase is

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associated with a particular move, gesture or quality of speech, it becomes much more directly memorable. Thus the students came to own these poems in a way they would not have if this had been simply a literature survey or poetry appreciation class. They now also have an initial sense of the pedagogical potential of being in possession of such a repertoire.

There was, of course, a gain here too for the appreciation of poetry. As one student put it, she “learned not only how to read poetry, but also how we can enjoy it.” The same student also said, “the learning by heart ... enabled me to feel the flow of English poems more naturally.” The mention of “flow” here underscores the fact that throughout the course of this work there was a perceptible increase in fluency in the target language, albeit investigating this was not part of the methodology, and so no direct evidence can be presented. It is nevertheless to be expected that an increase in fluency would be a detectable effect of such work, if such methodology were to be invoked.

While again this cannot be systematically documented, it can be confidently expected that this work also had a significant effect on the students’ performative skills, and this was indeed the perception of both students and teacher alike. As one student put it, “I think that the work on the poem and the many exercises we did as a preparation for the performance, such as singing, moving, and improvising, enriched my way of ‘being on stage’ and gave me a foundation I will be able to use again when I eventually ‘perform’ as a teacher.” A person’s ‘way of being on stage’ is probably one of the most imponderable aspects of teacher education, for in a teaching situation it is not necessarily what you say, the content, that is decisive, but rather how you *are*, your performative presence. Performing poetry, rather than drama (although we do that too) as a way of developing presence has the added bonus of taking us into the ways of imagination over a much longer spectrum of historical time than an individual play could. Poetry is the human attempt, as MacNeice has it, “to eavesdrop on the great presences”.¹⁰ It opens up the ever-present possibility of what Barfield calls participant (as opposed to analytical) knowledge. This is Wordsworth’s “something far more deeply interfused” that is “in the mind of man” and “rolls through all things.”¹¹ This was something of a round assertion when Wordsworth made it, and still is; but, as Barfield says of one of his own in a similar vein, “one need have no hesitation in making such round assertions; for either they are true, or poetry itself is a dream and a disease” (Barfield, 1973, p. 92). If, through preparing a programme of poetry for performance, the Barfield-Humboldt-Verhulst perspective here described has become concrete experience for the students, it is hoped that this will have a formative influence upon their presence as future teachers. They may be

¹⁰ This phrase is from the first stanza of his poem “Entirely”.

¹¹ From “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey”.

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attempting to teach one of their 'favourites' to a class, but in doing so they will know how much deeper the roots of poetic language are than is the ego of any individual poet. The students' feedback also testified to the fact that the work had stimulated them to delve further into the works of some of the poets they had encountered.

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Appendix:

Poetry programme feedback

1. How did you view the prospect of working on a programme of poems for performance?
2. Were you happy with the way the poems were chosen?
3. What about the unchosen ones? Was the fact that they followed a historical sequence helpful?
4. How did you find the process of learning-by-heart?
5. Did you feel you were provided with an adequate set of techniques for coming to terms with the poems artistically?
6. What impact did this experience have on your relationship to poetry and literature?
7. What impact did the work have on your presentational skills?
8. Have you followed up on any of the writers you encountered through the work?
9. Do you discern any pedagogical spin-off from having been through this experience?

Written permission to use answers to these questions was granted.