

REVIEW

De/Compositions, 101 Good Poems Gone Wrong, by W.D. Snodgrass. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2001, 312 pp., \$16.00 paperback.

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How should one teach poetry? Not too many generations ago the question would have been as meaningless as asking how one teaches breathing. Verse, it seems, has always been with us. In pre-literate times it was the natural tool, the only tool, for preserving tradition and history. But these are not pre-literate times. They are what you might call post-literate times. It is true that we learn—rather badly—to read and write as children but even as we develop these skills they are undermined by the barrage of commercially prescient but otherwise vacuous language hurled at us by the omnipresent television screen. If a person wants to communicate with another person, he now does so via the Internet where a computer checks his spelling, grammar, and provides helpful hints on composition. Poetry, which relies on the nuance and elasticity of language, does not seem very much at home in our cybernetic age, or so one would think. But poetry, much like the human spirit, has a resiliency to it that keeps it forever bursting forth. Still, it has a limited audience, and since it has become almost a foreign language to most of our young, the question of how to teach it becomes real and important.

W.D. Snodgrass, one of our finer poets, has come up with a novel, fascinating, and delightful way of showing students what makes a good poem good. In his new book, *De/Compositions* (there is a pun in the title; the poet's middle name is Dewitt and his friends call him De) he selects a great poem from our history, re-

writes it in verse retaining the literal meaning of the original but using relatively mediocre imagery and metaphor. The student quickly distinguishes the good from the bad and after that intuitive leap he can participate in mutually agreeable, even enjoyable analysis.

One of the poems chosen for *De/Compositions* is Yeats' sublimely erotic "Leda and the Swan."

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

Snodgrass repeats the story that when Yeats gave a copy of the poem to his secretary for typing she threw up her hands and resigned from the job. That took place, of course, before World War II. In today's world men of letters, no matter how cushy a university job they may have, do not have personal secretaries nor for that matter if there were any typists today would any be shocked at what Yeats wrote. As for the decomposition, no one would

have been shocked at any time. It now follows:

An unforeseen assault, that huge form still
Above the helpless girl, dazed and distressed
By the attack then pinned down by his will
And massive force, powerless and oppressed.

How shall her terror-stricken throes escape?
Immortal radiance o'erwhelming her;
And how can she benumbed still by that rape,
Not feel the deity, inside her, stir?

The God's insemination genders there
The rise of Western empires, fall of Troy
And Eastern culture dead. Being caught up so,
Subjected to the iron will of the air,
Did she, too, see our future, share the joy
Zeus felt, before his wings could let her go.

Snodgrass uses this poem to illustrate the better effectiveness of the concrete and specific as opposed to the abstract and general. Thus "How can these terrified vague fingers push the feathered glory from her loosening thighs" is far more powerful than "How shall her terror-stricken throes escape immortal radiance."

It is interesting to note that the main image of the poem, the feathered rape of Leda, is in itself so striking that the trite language that surrounds it in the decomposition does not sink the poem completely; rather we have what is an immensely powerful poem reduced to an interesting variant of an ancient myth. The differences between the two, and the varying degrees of effectiveness, will generate considerable class discussion, the first step towards a developed literary critique.

Other instructors might wish to point out that because of this rape, Leda gave

birth to Helen, the presumed cause of the Trojan War, thus the references to the broken wall, the burning tower and Agamemnon dead. But the author's intent is not to explicate or criticize a poem but rather to show why one works when its literal paraphrase (like a verbatim translation) falters.

Not all decompositions are so serious or so complex. Take for example "My Papa's Waltz," by Theodore Roethke. The first stanza goes:

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

It is decomposed as follows:

Your whiskey-breath smelled strong
Which turned my stomach queasy;
I had to go along
Though that was far from easy.

Here although the central image is maintained the decomposition becomes comic. What was once a serious poem becomes risible simply because of trite language and too pronounced a meter. But the humor here is a good humor, the relish of playing with words; and this good humor is evident throughout the book. Snodgrass, more Aristotelian than Miltonian, believes the purpose of poetry is pleasure, and the juxtaposition of the de/composition alongside the original is meant to be not only enlightening but also pleasurable, the pleasure of recognizing skill and achievement.

Like every good pedagogue, Snodgrass categorizes. For the purpose of this book he divides poetry into five subsections. The first, Abstract & General vs. Concrete & Specific, is illustrated by "Leda and the Swan." The second he lists as Undercurrents, where a poem may convey a sense

quite the opposite of its literal meaning, as for example Thomas Hardy's "The Man He Killed."

"Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a-crown."

The de/construction is:

"How vile and terrible is war!
You feel no qualms at killing
Men you'd buy drinks at any bar
Or lend them crowns and shillings."

The de/composition tells us what Hardy actually meant, but because it is simply didactic, it falls flat. The understatement of Hardy's narrator in its simplicity is in effect far more complex, and thus compelling. The third category he titles *The Singular Voice*, and quotes such poets as Emily Dickinson or E.E. Cummings who lend a unique if highly personal quality to whatever they write. The fourth, *Metric & Music*, has to be of importance to someone with Snodgrass's musical ear, and we saw a brief example of it in the Roethke poem just cited. The fifth category, *Structure & Climax*, deals with the various elements of a poem that weave together for a climax, where the whole becomes greater than its parts. These five subtexts are but one way of

approaching poetry, but in Snodgrass's case the classifications work well.

It is a great temptation to quote more examples since all the original poems are very good; in a way the book is a delightful anthology. Nevertheless it is meant as a pedagogical tool and there lies its value. Also refreshing is the avoidance of social studies. The great mantra of sex, class, and caste is ignored. By revealing the essence of a poem, Snodgrass shows us that poetry is much more than the iteration of rhymed socio-political dogma, and by not even discussing sex, class, and caste he makes a silent statement as to what is truly important.

For those wishing to teach poetry this book will be valuable in opening the eyes and hearts of students as to how poetry works. It could even stimulate the writing of both verse and de/compositions not necessarily for the advancement of poetry but for the advancement of the student. It will also offer a good deal of enjoyment to both the student and teacher as they pursue the chimera of the ideal poem.

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