Many students come to the poetry workshop with preconceived missions and explicit goals for their writing. These often involve desires to expose injustice or to shatter some power structure: parents, church, boss, a spurning or abusive lover. Such impulses are natural and in large part crucial to the making of poems, simply because art is never purely an aesthetic enterprise devoid of historical context, stripped of real-world struggles, or personal crises. Scholar Morse Peckham, for example, interpreted the entire Romantic movement in terms of what he called “cultural transcendence,” the drive of German, British, and American artists to critique culture in order to overcome its stultifying claims on the imagination (32).

Still, in an increasingly “tell all” contemporary culture—as well as in the aftermath of confessional and Beat poetry, with their forceful (and often misinterpreted) representations of personal trauma and social ills—the compulsion of many student poets to “rage against the machine,” to reveal corruption, or to bear witness to personal and/or public sufferings, may have reached unprecedented heights. Such urges too often lead students away from poetics and into polemics, a movement that can seriously compromise the ability to create and understand poetry.
We suggest, rather, several strategies that facilitate movement away from polemics. Each strategy also supports what flow theorist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls “divergent thinking,” which “stresses unorthodox and unusually naïve ways of processing data” (60-61). This article outlines three of these practical strategies—what we will call “chasing poems,” “reversal and negation,” and “juggling”—then offers a theorized approach to helping students reenter the political sphere with greater subtlety and nuance.

Our intention is not to isolate poems as pure objects of form and beauty with no social relevance. Rather, we wish to propose a process-oriented approach that invites students to see the “messages” in their finished poems as both dialogical—reliant for their significance on both writer and reader, and thus never totally conclusive or singular—and discovered—where messages are suggested to the writer during, instead of before, the process of making.

*Chasing Poems*
In his tribute piece “Calling,” Robert Lowell asks his friend Elizabeth Bishop:

Do
you still hang your words in air, ten years
unfinished, glued to your notice board, with gaps
or empties for the unimaginable phrase
—(as quoted in Kalstone 238)

Bishop was famous not only for her tentativeness towards her works being printed but also for her practice of cobbling together her poems—arriving at an image here, happening on a phrasing there, and patiently searching for ways to bring her gatherings of sound, image, and idea into poetic form. Yet many students assume that making poetry should duplicate the process of reading it, where one starts at the beginning and progresses in linear fashion towards the end.

Copious reading is, needless to say, essential to learning the craft. Poring over reams of poems helps students internalize tones, deep structures, and artful moves of language and mind. But reading polished poems may also dupe students into thinking that the poem-as-read embodies the poem-as-made. The alluring suggestion is that poems are created line by line in a sequence, rather than (à la Bishop) on a gap-filled “notice board.” When students set out to “write down the page,” with one thought following another, their results are usually predictable and uninspired.
In addition, most students are taught—from middle school to high school and sometimes even into college—to read poems for “the moral” or for “the central or hidden message.” This tendency powerfully affects the way students think about the purposes and processes of making poetry. As a consequence, teaching the craft often means “un-teaching” reductive reading practices that encourage students to think in terms of stable, conclusive meanings.

Complicating the scenario is the fact that most writing instruction in secondary-schools and universities focuses on critical argumentation. Students learn to begin with an overarching thesis and then supply evidence, examples, and interpretative speculations that will persuade readers to accept the plausibility and value of the initial umbrella claim. Naturally, when students transfer this model from critical to creative writing, their poems often sound discursive and mechanical.
In the neoclassical age, discursive, didactic poetics enjoyed high ascendancy. But contemporary readers—while still thrilling to Pope’s masterful versification and satiric wit, or Johnson’s tonal subtleties and towering wisdom—tend to be put off by the argumentative structure of *An Essay on Man* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. (Incidentally, it is often a good idea to read these or similar poems with students as a means of comparing “outmoded” with present-day poetries.)

Still, developing poets often feel the need to be ahead of their language, to have an idea in advance and then to use language in neoclassical fashion to articulate and ornament their preformed thought. So how do we teach student poets to cultivate patience with regard to making meaning? How can we teach them to follow words and images, to chase after language and let words lead them to unexpected and unlikely meanings?

Our classrooms emphasize non-linear approaches that foreground the play of language and downplay pre-conceived messages or thematic objectives. We encourage students to receive rather than to deliver
meanings, to remain open to thematic concerns that might present themselves during the act of chasing language. To teach “chasing,” we first have students scan their journals for especially provocative lines. One junior English major, for example, highlighted the following: “I remember your Atlantic eyes,” “Pink waves hovered sand,” “We’re only bone and water,” and “in the ankle depths of fog.”

Once a set of strong lines has been identified, we ask each student to apply a “give-and-take” or “point-counterpoint” strategy to help connect the lines in a loose fashion. We emphasize that sense and meaning hold little importance at this stage. The idea is to connect the passages tentatively until the language builds a momentum of its own. Once the draft starts to gain its own energy and is comfortably outside the writer’s direct control, we urge students to “chase” the writing, to follow the thrust of words and add stray associations. The key is to let sound and language lead, to allow the burgeoning text to suggest supplementary images and lines before the critical lens interferes and places value on individual phrases or words.

The aforementioned student performed this three-part exercise in a
ten-minute, in-class writing session. After completing it, however, she
was reluctant to read to the class what she had composed, confessing
almost with a note of shame: “I don’t know what it means.” Here is
what the “chasing” yielded:

I give you my Atlantic eyes
expecting pink waves to hover sand.
You give me pink eye
sticky poison in a cloud of crust.
What should I give you?
Myself in plaid pajamas?
We’re only bone and water after all.
Or should you give me cobbles?
Stony words that wrinkle skin?
You’ve taken me to Turtle Bay,
dirty iguanas unhatching history
of you and me. I’ve taken you
to the wooden well, a reflection
of my ruffled brow. I think
the well is bottomless, a spark
in the ankle depths of fog.
At stage two of the exercise, this student chose a point-counterpoint strategy of “I give you-you give me” (modified, we later learned, from a Gerald Stern poem that she’d copied out into her notebook). With some enticing lines pulled from her journal and then a tentative machinery of give-and-take, the student was able to chase her text. The process produced several striking passages in a matter of minutes, and while this is hardly a finished poem, the writing has a taut, evocative quality that suggests rather than explicates a difficult love relationship.

Though the student felt embarrassed by her lack of control over meaning, we argue that this very lack of control generated unlikely, non-polemical phrasings that suggest the speaker’s complex relationship with a vexing “other.” As instructors, then, we should nurture the deferral of meaning or sense. When we do, we are more likely to encounter the type of writing that this student read out loud, much to the surprise and delight of herself and of her peers.

Poems that have been “chased” during the writing process allow both
the writer and reader to discover meaning. The final product can actually offer the reader some version of the experience that the writer underwent in the act of creation. If writers do not surprise themselves in the making of poems, then they will hardly surprise their readers. “Chasing” is one way to encourage that notion of surprise. Rather than receptacles of pre-conceived meaning, poems become more akin to travel logs, where readers enact the travels of the writer during the making of the text. For this to happen, though, meaning has to dawn on the poet. The final presentation, when effective, will give readers the same sense of dawning meanings.

Negation and Reversal

In Errol Morris’s documentary *Fast Cheap and Out of Control*, Rodney Brooks, a robotics specialist from MIT, describes “the negation of a given claim” as one way he finds new territory for investigation. When stuck on a problem, Brooks negates the obvious, the commonly assumed. Students of poetry writing may also find negation to be an effective means of re-imagining their work, for it stresses a dialogical approach to the writing of poems, inviting contrary impulses and encouraging Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of naiveté.

Negating is also easily available as a technique for re-imagining one’s work, being simply a kind of toggle switch with which the writer may direct contrary currents of thought. Suppose a student poem ends with the image of a photograph lying in the street with no one noticing it. If the student negates or “reverses” the equation and has everyone stop to look at the photo, then the poem may open into more interesting territory. At the very least, the student learns one method of making the poem play for bigger stakes. Asking what type of photo would
actually draw people to it presents a greater challenge and a greater potential reward for the writer. Through reversal, the poem enacts the uncovering of a found artifact. In other words, the text enacts its own discovery.

In another workshop, a student wrote a poem that ended, “I have no word for this.” By reversing the last line, however, and writing, “I have a word for this,” the poet has to take a stand. To deny that language can describe some emotion or event is a bit of a cop-out. On the other hand, to offer the word, to complicate silence, to challenge complacency is more in the province of poetry.

In his monumental study of modern poetry, David Perkins asserts that one pitfall in many Larkin poems is the tendency at times to give over too easily to a “dispiritedness” and “apathy” (437). He notes that Larkin’s most successful poems struggle against pessimism of varying kinds, which is excellent advice for students of poetry writing. The attempt to combat facile conclusions (whether overly pessimistic or optimistic) necessitates that the poet struggle against preformed ideas, and that the poem enlarge its scope.

Reversal and negation methods also destabilize writerly autonomy and authority. They highlight the fact that nothing in the writing of a poem should be essentialized. Any element may be teased and toyed with or ultimately scratched in order to see what poetry it may yield. What is more, every element of the poem should be tested for elasticity. Negation and reversal are merely two tools with which students may begin to pry open their language to look for possibilities. As a by-product of the reversal and negation methods, students also learn that nothing in their poems is beyond reproach. Reversing or negating an implied or given reading or seeming fact of the text gives rise to potentially unique and significant subtexts or subversive readings. It allows students to reimagine the text without as many biases.

**Juggling**

Juggling is a means of downplaying or balancing polemics by situating cruel political realities in a wider context. In his poem “Watching Shoah in a Hotel Room in America,” Adam Zagajewski offers a prime example of juggling. The text suspends in the air, all at once, three different spheres of imagery, setting, and meaning. The first “juggling ball”—imagery from the implied moment of the poem’s composition—manifests itself in lines such as “some hotel guests sing Happy Birthday / as the one-eyed TV nonchalantly shuffles its images” (3-4). The second juggling ball—imagery from the poet’s boyhood in Poland—appears in lines such as “The trees of my childhood have
crossed an ocean / to greet me coolly from the screen” (5-6). The third juggling ball—various examples of victimhood and suffering—is evident in lines such as “Hay wagons haul not hay, but hair, / their axles squeaking under the feathery weight. / We are innocent, the pines claim. / The SS officers are haggard and old […]” (12-15).

Notice, though, how in the last sequence the juggling balls have begun to blur. That is, the image of oppression and victimhood signified by the wagon quickly returns to the pines, which were the same “trees of my childhood,” part of the second juggling ball. By juggling three “balls” throughout the poem, Zagajewski plays one off of the other, blurring their differences in the same way that balls in a juggling act become indistinguishable while distinctly separate. One knows there are three individual balls in the air, but it’s difficult to tell which is which at any given moment, and even harder to concentrate on any one ball for very long.

The “blurring” or “overlap” effect accomplished with juggling tends to soften polemics without sacrificing political critique. To carry the juggling analogy further, one ball (polemics) becomes contextualized and tempered by the other two (present day environment and childhood past). This by no means suggests that the political sphere is not important. Rather, juggling the three together makes the poet’s art one of balance, fusion, and continual movement. In Zagajewski’s poem, for example, no one sphere is too heavily insisted upon. Otherwise, he would have forfeited the entire act. Juggling, then, stresses the interdependency of each element of the poem, encouraging students to approach poems not as static documents but as dynamically interactive performances.

**An Oblique Return to Polemics**

Students can be easily misled by the language of poetry. Imagine, for example, that a student with no training in music wanted to write a cello suite in which to uncover the oppressiveness of consumerism and the dangers into which it is placing American culture. She would first have to learn how to play cello and also learn the entire language of music. Even then, could she fully direct her newly acquired language on whatever she wanted? We find that students of poetry are in a similar situation. The fact that poetry is comprised of a medium we use in other ways every day poses ever more troublesome snags. “I write grammatically,” runs the logic, “and score high on my essays. I will of course be able to write poems.” Beginning writers are hemmed in by a concept of language merely as a tool of commerce and as a binding social contract.
This is not, however, how poetry works. To invoke Yeats, poetry works best through connotation and implication rather than denotation and explication (154-55). In large measure, the methods outlined above build off of Yeats’s useful distinction. Moreover, chasing, negating, reversing, and juggling are fruitful strategies for attuning students to the kinds of metonymic acts that poems often perform. These strategies encourage students to think small by creating highly specific, often episodic pieces of writing that subtly suggest rather than overtly name certain realities worthy of interrogation.

They entrust to the reader, rather than to the writer, the role of primary critic of oppressive forces. Through a dialogical rather than monological process, the reader comes to infer—indirectly rather than directly—nuanced arguments about disturbing realities and their often violent conditions and consequences. The reader is invited to
understand not so much the obvious “truth” of a power relation, but more so to realize its subtle contours, its less noticeable effects, and, perhaps most importantly, the reader’s own implication in those structures.

“Tell all the Truth but tell it slant,” advised Emily Dickinson, a quote that aligns perfectly with the methods we have described here(1). Learning to write poetry in many ways is learning to trust two things: one’s language and one’s readers. “Message-driven” early efforts that offer direct rather than oblique critiques of power structures amount to failed acts of trust. The writer does not trust that his or her readers will “get” the poem, so the poem becomes far too explicit and, finally, more polemical than poetic. But, of course, failures are the material of any genuine apprenticeship. Indeed, a creative writing classroom is a place that should not only tolerate but embrace these “beautiful failures” in such a way as to encourage rather than to deflate beginning poets. Overtly polemical poems ultimately teach students a great deal about what poetry is by illustrating to them what it is not.

Some practical examples of poems that perform the type of “oblique critique” Yeats imagined include Sharon Olds’s “The Food-Thief,” Theodore Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz,” and two of our favorites to teach, Derek Walcott’s “Blues” and “Sabbaths, W. I.” These two poems, in fact, might form bookends on a shelf of oblique critiques. On the one side, “Blues” is narrative, highly dramatic, and generally more straightforward in its interrogations of, for instance, ethnic conflict, inner-city violence, mob mentalities, myths of race, and so forth. The lyrical, chant-like “Sabbaths W. I.,” on the other side, appears more suggestive, even while it clearly directs a critical gaze at the death-dealing effects of empire.

Close reading of “Sabbaths, W.I.” with students often finds them noticing Walcott’s careful juxtapositions of lushness (“cocoa grove where a bird whose cry sounds green and / yellow” [8-9]) versus emptiness (“hillsides like broken pots” [18]); vital life (“sisters gathered like white moths / round their street lantern” [29-30]) versus evacuating stasis (“ferns that stamped their skeletons on the skin” [19]).
The poem is extraordinarily painterly in its depiction of a vibrant West Indian tropical landscape, as one need only follow Walcott’s use of colour throughout. Yet he simultaneously presents the landscape as dead, enervated, stuck in time. Such a poem may be the apotheosis of oblique critique, because it allows the lush imagery and deadening stillness to imply dangerous imbalance. One feels the poet wrestling internally (in the Yeatsian sense) with conflicting attitudes about a culture simultaneously holding out defiantly against, and at the same time withering under, post-colonial forces. Students, however, will be hard-pressed to find explicit statements of power struggles within the poem.
The introduction to the facsimile and transcript of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* features the now-famous quote by the author about his poem, that it was “just a piece of rhythmical grumbling” (xxxiii). Though the comment is somewhat flippant, the notion of rhythmical grumbling suggests something about the way the poem may have been written: with sound privileged over sense, the implied over the declared, the ineffable over the easily categorizable.

Oblique critique frees students to approach their poems much as we might imagine Eliot approaching his: as something initially far less sophisticated than untrained writers want to believe. We encourage students to imagine poetry rather as a return to a more primitive use of language, to rhythmical grumbling. Of course, *The Waste Land* and many other accomplished poems involve a blending (or juggling) of many different ways in which language can mean. Nonetheless, one of the ways poetry means is exactly this physical and primitive sense towards which Eliot gestured.

Students come to the reading of texts, especially those they write, with certain assumptions based on cultural heritage, family, religious beliefs, the way they feel in that moment, and many other smaller factors. Chasing poems, reversal and negation methods, juggling, and oblique critique (in so far as they are subversive and undermine easy authorial intent) make students aware of how unstable language can be. What we challenge our students to do, then, is just that: take the language they use each day and destabilize it. Such an act is finally self-defining. Through the strategies mentioned above, poetry becomes destabilized language—charged, evocative, and difficult to suppress. The artistic act itself becomes political.

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