# ASSESSING STUDENTS' SONGS OF THE SELF

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I Have a Dream

I have a dream to be
the best I can. To accomplish
the things I want to do in
life. My one goal in life is
to be what I am and that
is me. I would like to fulfill
my dream one day, only if
dreams could come true.
       —8th Grade Girl

Darkness

Black, dark—
you have no sight.
There is no light.

You stumble. You fall.
Experience is what you lack.
The blind man is fighting back.

sounds
Laughter is what you hear.
You're angry.
You're hurt.
You're full of fear.

You scream,
You punch.
You start to cry,
and finally
you die!
      —7th Grade Boy

A Shadow

I stand here alone
A shadow
An image of what
I had been

I'm looking back
At my life
And seeing what
I was then

I see only the bad
But in places
A glimmer of good
Pierces thru

That glimmer of light
Is one face
Which knows me still
Tho I'm through

And tho I am yet
But a shadow
She knows who I am
She knows me.
         —11th Grade Girl

What Am I

I am an old pair of jeans,
worn out from hardwork,
blue from too much stress,
tired of being tossed into a corner

I am a cat
full of character,
sometimes playful as a kitten,
other times as ferocious as a panther

I am a river
constantly on the move,
able to take away life
or provide a place to live
         —10th Grade Boy

I first came across these poems when several colleagues and I were sorting through a large batch of poems submitted by Kansas students in grades 7-12 to *Young Kansas Writers*, a special yearly edition of *Kansas English*. One conclusion we came to about these four poems, along with 82 others out of a total of 726, was that they were poems of the "self." In these poems poets were primarily concerned with finding a poetic shape in language that would help them directly understand and represent their own perceptions of themselves, their own thoughts and feelings, even their own thinking and feeling about thoughts and feelings.

Poems like these can be hard to work with in the classroom. In fact, many teachers and poets who teach try to discourage them any way they can—including giving assignments that lead students to avoid such naked introspection. This is not such a bad strategy. It is much easier and in may ways more productive to work with poems about football—or even daffodils—than it is to work with a poem which seeks out a shadow that is not a shadow at all, but an undiscovered dimension of the poet's being. Yet, poems like these from inside young poets do come out. The real problem is what to do when we receive such poems.

In this essay I pursue the question of how to assess these four poems and students' development in writing poems like these. Since "assessment" is spoken of so often and so loosely by so many people these days, let me first of all explain what I mean by that term. My old Webster's dictionary suggests that "to assess" carries with it, in its root words, two segments of meaning: "to sit beside" and "to assist in the office of a judge." The second meaning is more familiar to us: when most people speak of assessment, they mean nothing more than judging or grading or evaluating students' products or performances. This is a hard business. The first meaning, though, "to sit beside," is very interesting. Even though a check with the OED confirms that that segment of meaning is closely related to the other, it puts the emphasis in a slightly different place. When I go about assessing student poems, I try to stay close to this slightly different place. In this essay I "sit beside" these young poets, to try to understand their poems and what kind of progress they might make in writing them. I also want to consider ways of responding to such poems in order to help students grow as poets.

# WALT WHITMAN, KOSMOS

A good place to start understanding these poems is with the master of poems of the self, Walt Whitman, and a long poem from *Leaves of Grass*, "Song of Myself." "Song of Myself," in its final version, opens by declaring its intention to focus directly on the self of the poet, and through the self, to reach outward to the self's manifold connections with the world. Whitman's vision is at once self-centered and selfless:

> I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
> And what I assume you shall assume,
> For every atom belonging to me as good
>     belongs to you.

"Song of Myself" is an ambitious and complex poem. Yet, one basic impulse from which it springs—the need to know the self and to find a way to represent the self in language—is an impulse shared by these four student poets of the self.

Echoes between Whitman's poem and the student poems are easy to find. For example, Whitman, reveling in himself, in his unabashed acceptance of body and soul—"welcome in every organ and attribute"—may be more eloquent, but is not more profound than the "I Have a Dream" poet in her need to "be what I am and that/is me." When Whitman writes "there is that in me—I do not know what it is—but I know it is in me," he perhaps knows better, but no more than the poet of "The Shadow" who also senses within herself the presence of another trying to emerge. Likewise, when Whitman writes "And as to you, Death, and you, bitter hug of mortality, it is idle to try to alarm me," he is confronting the same emotions and poetic challenges that the poet of "Darkness" is just discovering. And who but the poet of "What Am I" is better prepared to grasp the legacy of the poet who wrote

> Do I contradict myself:
> Very well then, I contradict myself;
> (I am large—I contain multitudes.)

I remember once hearing someone complain about such student poems by calling them "voices out of the void." That they may be, but they are also voices singing in harmony with other voices from the heartland of a well-respected poetic tradition. Whitman himself might draw the connections even more extensively:

These are really the thoughts of all men in all
 ages and lands, they are not original with me,
If they are not yours as much as mine they are
 nothing, or next to nothing,
If they are not the riddle and the untying of
 the riddle they are nothing,
If they are not just as close as they are distant
 they are nothing.

This is the grass that grows wherever the land is
 and the water is,
This is the common air that bathes the globe.

## TAKING THE BACKWARD STEP

One prominent characteristic of Whitman's song is the use
of long lists of concrete details and examples to construct his vision
of the self. Part 15 closes like this:

Flatboatmen make fast towards dusk near the cotton-
 wood or pecan-trees,
Coon-seekers go through regions of the Red river or
 through those drain'd by the Tennessee, or through
 those of the Arkansas,
Torches shine in the dark that hangs on the
 Chattahooche or Altamahaw.
Patriarchs sit at supper with sons and grandsons and
 great-grandsons around them,
In walls of adobe, in canvas tents, rest hunters and
 trappers after their days sport.
The city sleeps and the country sleeps,
The living sleep for their time, the dead sleep for
 their time,
The old husband sleeps by his wife and the young
 husband sleeps by his wife;
And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward
 to them,
And such as it is to be one of these more or less
 am I,
And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.

Recognizing the prominence of such a profusion of detail in
a mature song of the self is an important aspect of trying to under-

stand students' development in writing their own songs. At the theoretical base of many, if not most, school writing curriculums there is a familiar and widely respected principle derived from Piaget and other cognitive researchers.[1] This principle states that thought and language abilities develop in a linear pattern of growth toward greater powers of abstraction, analysis, and generalization. When this principle is enacted single-mindedly by curriculum planners, the result is that as students progress through school, they are exposed to more and more transactional writing tasks, such as research papers, that focus more and more on the ability to write and think in general terms. As important as these abilities are, such a developmental sequence is only partially complete. What is often lost in an overemphasis on transactional writing is the writing of poetry. As Whitman demonstrates, skill in writing poetry involves the need to move in exactly the opposite direction—toward concrete language and details, toward image and metaphor as well as ideas.

To understand development in poetry writing and, further, to understand the place of poetry in the curriculum, poets are probably a much better guide than most principles derived from cognitive research. And for poets it is exactly as William Carlos Williams said, "No ideas but in things," or as Wallace Stevens said, "Not ideas about the thing, but the thing itself." Here is how Bill Zavatsky of the Teachers & Writers Collaborative applies these poetic principles to school curriculums:

> I think it is important for teachers to recognize that in the search for illuminating details, poetry parts company with the tendency toward generalization and abstraction that forms the warp and woof of American education. When we train our children to think in general terms we give and take away, and it is poetry's loss. I am not disputing the necessity of the general statement, but for the poet, reality exists in a dazzling and fantastically complicated matrix of thoughts and concrete perceptions. Poetry cuts across the grain of generalized thinking by moving back to specific detail. (84)

One developmental researcher can shed some additional light on what Zavatsky is getting at here. Andrew Wilkinson's studies of children's language are not based on the same narrow cognitive perspective that informs one-way curriculums. Wilkinson works from a much broader perspective that includes attention to stylistic,

moral, and affective development as well as cognitive. Wilkinson's sense of affective development comes close to capturing the idea of what I like to think of as a "backward step" in the development of poetry writing abilities.

Wilkinson's affective scale focuses on the development of young writers' abilities to represent "self" in an extended context which includes categories for "others," "the reader," "environment," and "reality." In Wilkinson's interpretation of these categories, maturity of expression is assessed not just on the basis of the writer's ability to generalize, but also in a way that acknowledges the need of the writer to be able to move, as Zavatsky put it, back against the grain toward the specific, the concrete, the metaphoric.

Thus, in Wilkinson's view, an immature writer "assumes the environment" or the setting in a generalized way, whereas a more mature writer "chooses environmental items to achieve an effect, thus showing a higher degree of selectivity . . ." (75). Likewise, Wilkinson notes the ability of a thirteen-year-old autobiographer to be able not only to express a general "awareness of the way emotion works" (139), but also to "find metaphorical equivalents" for emotion (139). For Wilkinson, development does indeed look forward toward conceptual thought, but not only in that direction. It also looks back in the other direction as well, suggesting an awareness of concrete language and detail similar to the awareness Zavatsky and other poets have, but which most school curriculums do not.

Applying this idea to the four poems above gives a picture of how we might begin to assess them developmentally. "I Have a Dream" ranks pretty high in its level of generality. It is in fact very like a prose statement of conventional values. In the view of the development of poetry writing abilities suggested by Zavatsky, though, "I Have a Dream" is an immature poem. There is no concrete language, no concrete detail, no image. In essence, there is no dream here, just ideas about a dream.

"Darkness" is also a very general, conceptual piece of writing. The poem does, however, begin to coalesce around the image of the "blind man" who is "fighting back" against the "darkness." Such a move, however slight, suggests that this poem is beginning to take the backward step toward concreteness that signals a step forward in the development of a poet. What this poem is still not able to do is to find a way to integrate its separate images with

the feeling of the whole poem and to unite the "blind man" with the "you." The poet of "The Shadow" is close to being able to do that. In that poem "the shadow" is built into the poem in such a way that it is becoming, as James Britton would say, "contextualized not by segments, but as a whole" (175). The details of "light," "face," "shadow," even though they are sketchy, are tied together and tied to the self that is being shaped and given voice. "What Am I" is able to take this developmental move even further in the direction of concrete details, language, and images. The thinking that is going on in that poem—not just the language—is much different and much more poetic than the thinking and the language in "I Have a Dream." Yet, even though it is more concrete, it is not by any means narrow or limited. In its very concreteness it discovers the movement and ambiguity that must flow through a poet's mind for the poet to be a poet.

Such an assessment of these poems is not without paradox. Even though "What Am I" is a more mature poem, the poet is younger than the poet of "The Shadow." Indeed, here is a poem written by a third grade student of Jack Collom's that he includes in his wonderful book about children's poetry, *Moving Windows*:

> Snake! Skin of water
> Eyes like gold.
> No feet and far to go.
> To go to pits of death.
> To eat people.   (23)

This poet has a fine sense of detail and of how to weave concrete language and images into a poetic whole. So is this a mature poem? No, not in the sense of the poems I have been discussing. The ground this poet is standing on is the formative concrete ground that an older poet—both cursed and blessed with later developing cognitive capacities—can only reach by taking the backward step. L.S. Vygotsky, in his study of the development of thought and language, makes the point that once a human being reaches adolescence and becomes a conceptual thinker, it becomes increasingly difficult to reach and maintain contact with poetic thinking. He says:

> In the contest between the concept and the image that gave birth to the name, the image gradually loses out; it fades

from consciousness and from memory, and the original meaning of the word is eventually obliterated. (74)

The image loses—unless it is won back by the poet. Winning back the image and building it into poems is the real accomplishment of these singers of the self. Everyone loves the spontaneous wisdom of younger children's poetry. Louis Dudek spoke for many when he wrote that "childhood is the great age of poetry," but that the poems of high school students are transitional and are "always much less interesting than the poetry of little children" (15). As a result of such views, secondary students' poetry is often dismissed as just another one of the confused, chaotic by-products of the adolescent mind. However, in these four singers of the self we can see how that chaos might be resolved. In the poems of children we see the birth of poetry. In adolescent songs of the self we witness the birth of poets.

## BUILDING FROM THE CENTER

Another widely honored principle derived from research in cognitive development states that as human beings mature they move from an egocentric childhood view of the world and experience toward a more mature ability to understand and assume a wider range of points of view. Thus, school writing curriculums are sequenced to move toward more objective forms of writing for audiences progressively removed from student writers in time and space. Current emphases on "critical thinking" and "collaborative learning" reinforce that sequencing by stating as a main objective the need for students to decenter and to learn to see from others' points of view.

This need to decenter is indeed an important part of students' school experience. Yet to assume that such growth is a simple matter of linear progress, as curriculums tend to do, is to oversimplify. Development in thought and language processes, just like the processes themselves, include recursive patterns of growth, consolidation, and recovery. Everywhere there are backward steps. Britton reminds us that the period of adolescence is especially such a time, and that even as students move forward toward maturity, they also have a need to recover self-centeredness (231). One particular characteristic of this recursive movement—but by no means the only characteristic—is adolescents' need to "achieve

through their writing a maturer view of themselves and the world
. . . by looking back into their own childhood" (253).

The need to re-consider the self and at the same time to
establish an understanding of the continuity between childhood
and young adulthood is a main feature of students' songs of the
self. The following poem, entitled "Blue Jeans Forever," written
by a ninth-grade girl, illustrates this dimension of poetic
development:

> As I grow to be a lady, I miss my Tomboy look.
> No longer can I play football, but I have to read a book.
>
> My talents are fading, this I know to be true.
> I miss beating the guys in football, cause now they're
>     beating me too.
>
> So I'd better hang up the football and cash in the dirt.
> Cause even though I'm not a child, my feelings can still
>     be hurt.
>
> I dread becoming different. I feel I'm losing part of me.
> But changing happens to everyone, whoever they may be.
>
> So I'll struggle day by day, watching myself grow weak.
> (Little do they know I'm almost at my peak!)
> Cause under the dress, the ruffles and lace, is a blue
>     jeans baby just waiting to take her place.

Even though on first glance this piece might not seem like
a major poetic accomplishment, it is a remarkable poem. The poet
here is certainly "centering" on her self, but not in a childish way.
She is, in the process of making the poem, reconstructing her
own understanding of her self as she writes. In this process of
reconstructing—or re-vising as in re-seeing—she is taking a step
back toward her self as she was, back toward the details of her
childhood, so that ultimately, in some other poem, some other
life, she may take a step forward into a fuller and more complete
vision of herself. Self-centeredness for this poet is a matter of center-
ing, of finding the center in a welter of feelings and images so
that she might have a solid foundation from which to build and
move. And one of the directions she might be headed is toward
the ground inhabited by the poet of "What Am I," whose con-
struction of a self has led to the crafting of hard-edged images

of "I am" . . . or she might be headed in the direction of this poem written by a twelfth-grade girl:

## SECRETS

Dancing to the flame
of a candle,
my shadows
float with fragile measures
inspiring intimate moments
and beckoning to my silent youth.
The candle is my keeper.
It lifts me
and sets me down softly
like a child.
And I play among its shadows,
asking of my substance,
wondering of myself.

## RESPONDING TO SONGS OF THE SELF

The first point I always try to keep in mind when responding to such songs of self—no matter what age the singer—is that for many, these are high risk poems. Looking into the self, poets are often surprised—and even frightened—by what they see. Writing the poem, they lay the self bare: they are revealed to themselves and exposed to readers. So it makes a great deal of sense to go easy with these poems, at least until it is certain that poet, poem, and responder all understand each other. As much as we want singers of the self to write "good poems" the greatest need they have is simply to see themselves and to grow and to be accepted as poets.

When the time comes to move beyond acceptance, it is always a good practice—and an easy practice—to begin responding by recognizing the poet's accomplishments or by "talking back" person to person about the experience of the poem. All poets—regardless of age or experience—thrive on that kind of human contact. From there a good place to go is toward questioning. Not only do questions help responders learn more about a poem, but questions also help the poet move toward revising, and through revising, toward growth: revising IS growing. This is especially true of questions about concrete details. In a poem based on general state-

ment like "I Have a Dream," questions about the specific features of the speaker's dream and questions about the self of the speaker might easily help the poet move backward, as it were, toward a more concrete and poetic shape like that achieved by "What Am I." Another thing that helps is to share more mature poems with the poet. Even though it could be worthwhile to look at Whitman's poetry, for example, or other professional songs of self, poets writing poems like "I Have a Dream" are more likely to understand what is going on in poems like "What am I."

Even though students who write poems of the self do not always realize it, what they are fundamentally engaged in is an act of reflection. They are looking, often as if for the first time, directly at themselves and at their minds working. "The Shadow," for instance, among other things, is built up out of an intuitive, momentary vision of the process of seeing the self. Consequently, one important approach in responding is to help students understand what it is they are doing and to help them develop their powers of reflection and mindfulness. Leonard F.M. Scinto has identified this "self reflexive aspect of text" (157) as a powerful factor in the development of thought and language abilities. Likewise, Catherine Bruch, in a review of research in metacreativity, suggests that the sort of self-awareness that can attend artistic composing has implications far beyond simple conceptions of cognition and development. The following poem written by a twelfth grade girl suggests a significant beginning step in the life-long practice of knowing her own mind:

## THOUGHTS

Some days my thoughts are just butterflies—
    all colorful, and swift, and smooth.
They land on the flowers in
    the fragrant branches of my mind.

And other days they shine—
    such free and flying things!
I find the silver glitter in my hair,
    left by their arched wings.

Serious poets like these singers of the self do not just tell about and speculate about from a distance; instead they present— directly. In the process of composing they are present with

themselves and can see themselves in a way human beings do not ordinarily see themselves. In poems, poets move steadily ahead into the unknown and unspoken. They shed light on and give voice to what they can know of themselves—and what they know through themselves of the world. Who is up there ahead toward whom they are moving? Who is that singer moving with them?

> You will hardly know who I am, or what I mean;
> But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
> And filter and fibre your blood.
> Failing to fetch me at first, keep encouraged;
> Missing me one place, search another;
> I stop somewhere, waiting for you.

## NOTE

[1]Even though curriculum planners subscribe to this principle, many cognitive theorists do not. See, for example, Gruber.

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