

Richard Hague's *Lives of the Poem*: A Guide to the Heart of Creative Writing

by Lauren Lombardo

Richard Hague's insightful *Lives of the Poem* is a resource that embodies the heart and soul of creative writing. The text presents practical strategies, such as writing prompts and journeys through revision, that enable aspiring writers to hone their craft. As in his previous poetry and essay anthologies, Hague regularly emphasizes the importance of the writer's sense of place. Furthermore, throughout many of Hague's commentaries, readers discover an artistic philosophy akin to Percy Shelley's. Both poets acknowledge an invisible spirit that helps writers present familiar objects in an unfamiliar light. Although Hague is modest and contends that his text is not meant to serve as a handbook for writing poetry, it is, in fact, a model tutorial in which Hague exemplifies creative writing techniques through his own poetry and commentary.

This is not to say that Hague fails to achieve his primary objective in the text. Readers easily recognize and celebrate the poem as a living, breathing entity that, according to Hague, has the capacity for "complex inter-relatedness" (3). He contends that poetry has a ripple effect; it reaches corners of the world long after its birth. The author frequently uses personification to remind readers that the poem has a life separate from the poet. For example, as readers follow his revisions of "The Poem Braids Its Lover's Hair," Hague insists that "the Poem is the world's lover—it loves all, not just the girl whose hair it braids" (86). In another poem, "The Advocate Speaks in Defense of the Poem's Rights," the narrator insists that the poem is a badger:

It digs under the door
of your notions,
wrecks the tidy room
of your truth . . . (14-17)

Like a badger, the poem prods and disturbs the reader's sense of order. It plants the seed of doubt in readers' minds. Even the form of the poem resembles a badger's claw, with five prominent lines that stand out of the text, in gradually ascending and descending lengths. Clearly, the poem is alive. Yet, there remains strong evidence that *Lives of the Poem* also succeeds as a writing tutorial. Hague illustrates how writing is a craft that can be taught, and that the creative writing philosophy and process are just as important as the product.

Within the first fifty pages of the text, Hague conveys the importance of a sense of place. In 1922, Harlem Renaissance author, Jean Toomer, composed one of the century's most influential works, *Cane*, while living among the black southern folk community in Sparta, Georgia. In "Jean Toomer and the Avant-Garde," author Mark Whalen states that Toomer's poetry so completely captured the spirit of the region and culture that *Opportunity* critic, Montgomery Gregory, commended, "*Cane* is not OF the south, it is not OF the Negro; it IS the south, it IS the Negro—as Jean Toomer experienced them"(13). Since 1978, Hague's poetry has reinforced *his* identity as a regional poet as well. His subject matter often reflects his personal experiences growing up along the eastern banks of the Ohio River in the small industrial town of Steubenville, Ohio.

Lives of the Poem includes several selections in which Hague shows how sense of place inspires, much like the quintessential muse. In "The Poem Wakes and Receives Visitors," readers can almost hear the blue jay "shout . . . in Nepalese" (9). In "Burning Lady," Hague becomes the fisherman who reels "and feels the first black smack of death"(39), after he fails to save a blazing woman by rolling her into the river. And in "Placed," readers understand Hague's profound affinity for nature:

I live here to feel
the full moon's hymning
fill my skull,
to hear stars' codas
richen my throat,
the musky press
of shadows
whisper my name. (14-21)

Through these poems, Hague puts to rest the concerns of writers who fear that hometown experiences are mundane or of little interest to those who live in more exotic places. In fact, he warns that, "upward mobility . . . may well be a threat to the kind of placedness that certain kinds of poetry thrive on" (138).

Two contemporary authors have also noted the value of Hague's sense of place. In "Region and Vision: The Poetry of Richard Hague," Kevin Walzer reveres Hague for his ability to make use of the life and land in Ohio for the purpose of showing the interconnectedness of human and natural history. Walzer claims that, "place is a powerful source for poetry" (57), and in the silent world of plants and animals, writers "need not journey far to hear [their] voices; they are all around us" (59). Likewise, Frank Steele, English professor at Western Kentucky University, applauds Hague for his obsession with the primitive aspects of nature and the connections Hague establishes between man and nature through his poetry. In "Some Real Fruits and Vegetables: Richard Hague's Ripenings," Steele speaks to all poets when he states that writing about regional subjects has expanded in recent years. He believes there seems to be "among American readers, a greater tolerance for slightly alien details of place and even a more active curiosity about them, an openness, than was present fifty years ago" (354). Clearly, these authors share Hague's assertion that writers must value sense of place.

Another reason that *Lives of the Poem* may be considered a tutorial for aspiring creative writers is Hague's ever-present emphasis on the writing process itself. Within the commentary that follows many poems, readers are asked to respond to unusual writing prompts (write an anti-love poem, for example), keep commonplace

Books (to record fleeting moments or phrases) and Workbooks (for drafting). Hague suggests that readers engage in research and embark on field trips in order to enrich writing topics. Many of these suggestions are strategies Hague has used in his thirty-five years as a high school English teacher. When asked to define Mr. Hague's most useful strategy for inspiring students to write, former student, Abbie Louis, replied, "He told us stories! Stories about Steubenville, Ohio, where he grew up. Those stories got us thinking!" (Louis). By posing these strategies, Hague indirectly advises other creative writers that they must be proactive. They must be "badgers" and explore undiscovered territory.

Hague's text also showcases his students' writings as opportunities to share their own expertise. The commentary, "The Story of Silence" by Joanna Back, provides excellent instruction for aspiring writers. Hague allows Ms. Back to take the reader through her revising process. It is a fascinating read. Ms. Back explains her quest to discover silent images, such as an echo, a breeze and skinned trees. Her first draft captured the visual images of silence. Through her ongoing reflections, however, she instructs readers by revealing what is *missing* in her poem: a silent feeling, the lack of sound and minimal language. With every revision, readers learn the value of sound, simplicity, and critical thinking. Ms. Back then consults with a peer, a sight Hague likens to "two researchers in a science lab, plumbing the mysteries of the gene" (134). The final product, "Silence," is clearly more meaningful after witnessing the revising process.

But Hague, the teacher, is most visible in the way he advises readers with his edifying words of wisdom. Some of his advice is simple and straightforward: "Attention must be paid to places and customs and laws" (72) and "Settling is the enemy of excellence" (90). Prior to introducing "The Critic" (a poem about the writer's critical self), Hague acknowledges Leonardo DaVinci, whom he claims was a practitioner of irregularity and disorder. DaVinci often sketched confusing images as a means for discovering new inventions. Hague believes that current teaching models restrict creativity because many of us "have been conditioned" to distrust disorder, randomness, and nonlinearity" (167). When it comes to writing, Hague challenges readers to leave their comfort zones in order to create. In the end, the Critic must impose order. But writers must have the freedom to explore "the actual mess and mystery of the world and [be] invited to make sense of it on their own" (167). For all writers, the distinction between Creator and Critic must be understood and applied. However, Hague suggests that disorder and defying traditional practices often spawns creativity. This idea can prove quite liberating for future writers.

Hague's allowance for creative chaos is a stark contrast to the creative process endorsed by the British literary giant, Percy B. Shelley. Although it is somewhat apparent that Shelley and Hague are kindred spirits, this difference must be acknowledged. In his "Defence of Poetry," Shelley addressed the necessity for order and harmony during the creative process. Above all, he believed "the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness" (831). In other words, he believed that once composition began, the original inspiration was already waning. In his book, *Shelley: His Theory of Poetry*, Melvin Solvo states that Shelley (like Hague) sometimes struggled with word selection and "if the right word would not come he left a blank space" (147). But Shelley was convinced that the finest poetry was *not* produced through study and labor. Hague's creative philosophy is quite the opposite. He encourages writers to research their subjects, take field trips, and revise the work until it is right.

Having repeatedly consulted Hague's text in recent months, it is my belief that the

author enlightens future writers most by answering the questions that Shelley attempted to answer long ago: *Why do poets write poetry?* and *What purpose does poetry serve humankind?* The responses to these questions are the powerful threads that connect the two poets. Much like Shelley's Aeolian lyre that sought to capture the changing winds in order to play the changing melodies, Hague seeks to discover "what the poem is trying to get [him] to do . . . listening to it, trying to understand what it needs to say" (84). Both poets recognize the poem as having an invisible spirit.

In addition, both poets believe writers must show familiar objects in an unfamiliar light. In Hague's "The Poem Three-Railing Into the Mind," the narrator takes the reader into the gritty, late-night world of shooting pool. There, in a green-lit world, the narrator reveals:

poetry, that shapeshifter,
leaps from rail-shot
and talcum
as well as from
nightingales
and death. (20-25)

Just as Shelley strove to lift the veil from the hidden wonders of the world, Hague emphasizes the need to take readers to "places we haven't seen before, and with new ears and eyes and hearts" (32). Readers are stunned to think of a poem, lurking in a pool hall, waiting to be heard. This poem, along with many others, compels readers to reflect for hours.

As for the purpose that poetry serves humankind, Hague's philosophy is again, akin to Shelley's. He insists that poetry connects human beings to one another. We read and write books because "they change your life, they change the way you see the world" (29). This quote clearly aligns with Shelley's belief that poets were heralds, capable of inspiring people to connect with others and to work for change. According to Solvo, Shelley was convinced that any form of harmonious expression "[had] the possibility of communicating . . . and vitalized by its author's contact with his fellow-men, is poetry in the widest sense" (129). Hague illustrates this philosophy as well, in his poem, "During a Break, First Day of Writing Class," in which the narrator ponders outdoor sights and sounds, then wonders:

Who are these strangers,
Where are they from,
Why have we met,
How will they change
my dreams? (37-41)

This is but one of several selections in *Lives of the Poem* in which Hague attempts to connect with others through poetry.

Hague's text clearly shows that poems give life to ordinary aspects of our culture. And yes, poems have eternal lives. Yet, despite Hague's reluctance to identify his text as a teaching tool, aspiring writers, like me, cannot help but regard its content as educational. Hague shows how a sense of place gives poems a sense of reverence. Place is important because it offers writers a path for showcasing their own stories, their firsthand experiences—and in art, this always rings true. Hague also takes readers through the writing process by providing writing prompts, revision strategies, and the words of wisdom he has garnered as a poet for over forty years. Finally, Hague

asks readers to consider poetry as a means for understanding and connecting with the world.

I have copied one of Hague's most inspiring phrases from *Lives of the Poem* and taped it to the front cover of the copy that sits on my bookshelf. It reads: "I trusted that if I kept on working, I would discover what I needed to know" (83). Creative writers, both aspiring and established, will find many lives in Hague's creative classroom, *Lives of the Poem*.

Works Cited

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