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21L.004 Reading Poetry

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Paper #1 due 2 days after SES #5

Write a paper, 2 pages, 500 words, about either sonnet “Leda and the Swan” or “The World Is Too Much With Us.”

You’ve Already Started

You started working on your paper when you first began to make plentiful observations. You continued to add to those observations as you heard and discussed new ones. Observations about a poem or work of literature are concrete – something you can see that we can all see; they are what you notice – what strikes you or what you remember when you close the book. Noticing the “obvious” is good and always important – probably something we took for granted without ever thinking about. Observations never occur in the order of the poem you have read.

To express your observations, you’ll be using the language of description. You may notice tenses of verbs (controlling time), or which pronouns the poet uses (controlling point of view or who speaks) or how he shifts from singulars to plurals, what kinds of connections he uses, whether the sentences (not the lines themselves) are long or short – these are just samples of what might strike your attention.

You may not be interested in verbs or pronouns (too bad). You may be noticing another sort of thing: how much abstract or concrete there is, what sort of repetitions there are, grammatical structures, whether there’s a turn in what goes on, beginnings and endings.

Observations don’t summarize the work and don’t interpret it.

Beginning work on the paper

Now you’re ready to formulate an idea for a paper. Your collected observations are going to be the evidence for what you assert in your paper. Choose what speaks to you as the most interesting or luminous observations. Do at least a half an hour of prolific writing on that observation (or cluster) to get out on paper a body of language in which you can look for an expression of your idea. Don’t be afraid to use the language of the work. The Vendler chapter on “Writing About a Poem”

There are two “nevers.” Never begin writing about the poem by writing about its beginning. Always begin with what you think is its heart. Never follow the order of the poem. Don’t worry about covering it completely. Do speak the language of the work; it is a sign of authority. In poetry, we cannot substitute our own words for the poets’ words. We respond to and work with his/her words.

The difference between observation and idea is that observations are recognizable by others, but an idea needs to be explained. In writing about poem, it is your idea you are explaining, not the poet’s. The poet’s idea has been embodied; it does not need to be explained. Perhaps it will be a relief that your writing must comprehend not the whole poem, but the whole of your idea about the poem.

This first paper is deliberately short in length to give you a chance to trust your full expression of your idea. Coleridge called ideas “generative seeds.” Because they exist *in potentia*, they ask to be acted on. They take energy, patience, luck and a certain kind of faithfulness.