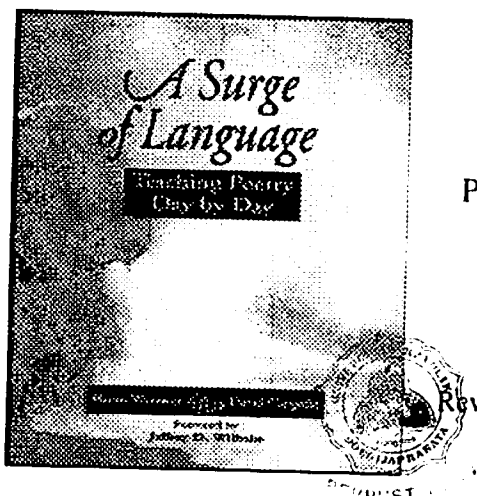


A BOOK REVIEW

A SURGE OF LANGUAGE: TEACHING POETRY DAY BY DAY



Baron Wormser and
David Cappella

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Reviewed by Subur L. Wardoyo¹

Baron Wormser, poet *laureate* of Maine, and David Cappella are practicing poets as well as veteran teachers and workshop presenters. And both are deeply committed to helping teachers teach poetry. In *A Surge of Language*, they take a unique approach to their task. Instead of presenting the typical how-to book, they pose as "Mr. P.," a fictional English teacher who puts poetry at the center of his teaching.

The text itself poses as Mr. P.'s journal and takes us through a single school year, thus providing a friendly narrative thread. In an engaging,

¹ Drs. Subur L. Wardoyo, Dip TEFL, M.A., PhD, is a full-time lecturer at Semarang State University and at the Graduate Program of Literature at Diponegoro University, Semarang.

unprofessorial style, Mr. P. offers a convincing rationale for making poetry an integral and daily part of the English curriculum. He also provides an array of lively teaching strategies as he describes his interactions with poems and students. This intimate biography-like approach makes this book very user-friendly for any teacher who has so far felt intimidated by the technicalities and complex concepts presented in most poetry textbooks.

In their introduction, Wormser and Cappella suggest that one of the many reasons to integrate more poetry into the curriculum is to connect students "with the multiethnic nature of democracy" (2004:xxiii). While *A Surge of Language* does not focus specifically on multicultural literature, the book is certainly relevant to the multicultural curriculum currently advocated not only in America but also in most parts of the world including Indonesia. The authors cover a wide ethnic range, including poems by African Americans such as Weldon Kees, Etheridge Knight, and Marilyn Nelson; poems by Hispanic poets such as Tino Villaneuva; *haiku* by Basho-; and poems by Native American poet Mary Tallmountain. Throughout the book there is an underlying philosophy that poetry speaks to and for all of us, regardless of our origins or ethnic backgrounds.

Mr. P. begins each class by reading a poem. Some days the poem is simply read, some days it is discussed, some days it is a springboard into a poetry-writing activity, and some days it is used to teach a skill. Mr. P. has heard many teachers say they do not have time for poetry, but he argues that teachers who infuse their classrooms with poetry need less time for other endeavors. When students hear a poem read aloud each day, they learn the importance of listening and paying attention to language. When students regularly study poetry, they learn to scrutinize the sentence and thus learn the elements of grammar. They use the dictionary and acquire vocabulary almost daily. They become good prose writers. In this way Wormser and Cappella indirectly and elegantly tries to convince the readers how effectively poems support the study of language. And according to Mr. P., the students also become good test takers.

He urges teachers not to allow the pressures of standardized testing to be a reason to avoid making time for poetry. The test is less intimidating to students who have been reading, analyzing, and writing a lot of poetry. While the tests themselves typically contain little poetry, ongoing study of poetry improves performance on such tests. The careful attention to word choice,

syntax, detail, metaphor, and ideas pays off. Students develop the habit of close reading, a habit that “applies to prose as much as it applies to poetry” (Wormser and Capella 2002:134).

Poetry also provides the best opportunity to teach revision. Mr. P. contends that revising a poem prepares students to revise longer work:

Revising poems seems a powerful model for writing because the scale of a poem is so manageable. Revising a term paper or a report is a big task. A poem of twenty lines or so is not so daunting. This issue of scale is one of the compelling reasons to use a lot of poetry (Wormser and Capella 2002:57).

Mr. P. provides an excellent list of technical aspects of poems for students to consider when making revisions and an equally excellent list of fifteen ways to get students to consider content revisions rather than cosmetic touch-ups.

Throughout the book, Mr. P. offers specific strategies for teaching poetry. One of the most important is dictation. When the daily poem is not too long, he dictates it while students copy it into their journals, a simple technique that enhances literacy as students must be attentive to such matters as punctuation, spelling, and capitalization. This technique also subtly makes students attentive to poetic techniques such as sounds and line breaks. Funneling the words through students’ heads and hands gives life to those words. Most teachers nowadays have discarded dictation as an old-fashioned way of teaching language and no teacher has probably ever thought of using dictation as a method to teach poetry, but in the hands of Mr. P. this method seems convincingly worth reconsidering.

During discussions, Mr. P. does not ask questions about what the poem *means*. Instead, he talks about the craft in the poem: “If you talk about art, meaning will take care of itself because art creates meaning” (Wormser and Capella 2002:12). His first question is often about word choice. Ten generic but thought-provoking word questions are provided. Sometimes Mr. P. asks just a few of the questions; other times, he asks all of them. Using the poem “Memorial” by Thomas Mc- Grath, Mr. P. models the technique that he calls the “words-talking-to- words approach” (Wormser and Capella 2002:76). He concludes, “What happens in talking about a word is what always happens:

from the single word we move on to other aesthetic and thematic issues” (Wormser and Capella 2002:13). Such an approach engages everyone, including the teacher, in a process of discovery.

Here again the teacher of literature will sense a resurrection of Cleanth Brooks Formalist credo crying out to literary critics that the function of criticism is not to reveal the meaning of a literary work, but to explain *how* a work means.

As early as 1947, Brooks already insisted that meaning is a controlled experience that has to be experienced through the various elements at work in a work. It really comes as a refreshing wind from the Formalist past to witness Mr. P. carrying out Cleanth Brooks abstract ideas in concrete day-to-day classroom activities. And the best of it all is how simple it actually is for a poetry teacher to apply this Formalist approach.

In Mr. P.’s class, poems are not discussed and then abandoned. Periodically, they are resurrected and discussed in terms of a new poem. Mr. P. calls this strategy “threading the poems” (Wormser and Capella 2002:34). Now the poems talk to each other as he guides students in finding connections. Poetic technique is one such link. For example, after using Chuck Berry’s song, “Nadine,” to teach rhythm, first studying one line, then moving to one stanza, Mr. P. brings in Edna St. Vincent Millay’s sonnet, “Pity Me Not.” He asks students to compare rhythm in the two works. From there, he moves to a comparison of the writers’ attitudes about love as revealed by word choices, line lengths, and metaphors. He describes this as “making sense of one poem in terms of another poem to the advantage of both poems” (Wormser and Capella 2002:36). This description is a beautiful example of how user- friendly Wormser and Cappella have made their text.

Actually the idea of “making sense of one poem in terms of another poem to the advantage of both poems” comes from the very complex concept of intertextuality, which Julia Kristeva explains in a more complicated manner as the space of a given text in which several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect. Some teachers might find Julia Kristeva’s definition quite intimidating, but most teachers would find Wormser and Cappella’s readily accessible. This is the charm of Wormser and Cappella’s textbook. It successfully presents esoteric ideas in plain and simple language.

Mr. P.’s students not only read and study poetry, they also write it. When it comes to finding prompts, his motto is, “Show me a poem and I’ll

show you a prompt” (Wormser and Capella 2002:8). For example, his usual method is to ask students to read and discuss a poem in terms of some limited focus, such as the structure or poetic strategy used. He then directs them to use the same device as they write their own poem. Another approach to a prompt is to ask students to consider a poem as a “soundscape.” Mr. P. introduces Thomas Hardy’s “In Church” and students consider the poem’s devices of sound and draw connections between the soundscape and the emotions in the poem. Moving from poem to prompt, Mr. P. gathers words students like for their sound. He asks them to write a poem containing some of these words, to “generate a poem simply from language” (Wormser and Capella 2002:42). Thus sound, rather than lived experience, is used to inspire a poem. There are additional examples of how to use a poem as a prompt throughout the book. Teachers will develop skill in creating their own prompts, and students will “see how art sparks art” (Wormser and Capella 2002:9).

Wormser and Capella have written an important book, one that could make a significant difference in the way poetry is taught in school. Teachers who are already comfortable with poetry will find themselves reenergized; teachers who are not comfortable with poetry will teach it and may well find their teaching of poetry revolutionized.

