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Teaching the Art of Poetry

The Moves

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For Kate Barnes and Marion Stocking
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A. D. C.

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Preface

This book is written with classroom teachers in mind. It is the teacher who is the institutional gatekeeper of poetry in our society. There is no poetry (particularly contemporary poetry) in most students' homes; they do not see poetry on the television or in the newspaper. What they hear on the radio is determined largely by the exigencies of commerce. For millions of young people their like or dislike of poetry depends on their teachers. The task is a serious one and many teachers discharge their responsibilities admirably with great feeling and insight. Over the course of decades of talking with teachers, we have come to realize that many teachers would like to make poetry a classroom staple rather than an occasional unit. We have written this book with those teachers in mind.

Teaching the Art of Poetry is, as its name indicates, a guide to the art of poetry and a focused approach to how to teach poetry. To teach poetry, a teacher needs a knowledge base and a methodology. The art of poetry represents a crucial knowledge base for every teacher; imparting that knowledge by means of experiential learning represents a methodology. The over 160 exercises and 19 weeklong lesson plans in this book speak to the importance we place on the actual classroom. For too long the teaching of poetry has been lumped together with other aspects of literature under the rubric of teaching for meaning. First and foremost, poems are instances of art.

There are 19 chapters in this book devoted to various aspects of the art of poetry and a 20th chapter devoted to pedagogy. The chapters are organized so that the book begins by focusing on the physical basis

of poetry (without which there is no poetry), then moves to structural issues such as syntax and grammar, then to aspects of language use such as word choice, details, metaphor, and image. Chapters 10 and 11 examine the stanzas and forms that distinguish poetry. The remaining chapters treat some of poetry's special techniques and concerns. The pedagogy chapter provides a rationale for how to teach poetry and includes a hierarchy of methods that enables the teacher to build skills sequentially.

Having said all we have said about teaching and teachers, we feel that this book is for anyone who is interested in learning more about the art of poetry. Although it contains dozens of poems in their entirety, the book is not an anthology; it is a guide, a series of signposts, vistas, predilections, observations. We have cited much contemporary poetry because its richness is scant in classrooms and in our society generally, but we have also quoted the likes of Shakespeare (many times), Keats, Wordsworth, Milton, and many other worthies.

What we cite in passing are merely indications of how much exists. As with any good guide, we hope this book will allow you, our reader, to get some ground under your feet and go your own way. To have poetry be a force in one's life, day-in, day-out, is a great blessing.

We wish to thank the following people who have helped make this book possible: George Drew, Donald Hall, Jo Josephson, Naomi Silverman, Cathy Stutz, Deborah Butler, and Marc Hudson.

How To Use This Book

Each chapter contains four sections: an essay, a set of classroom exercises, a weeklong lesson plan, and a bibliography. For the classroom teacher, each essay provides a foundation for discussing an aspect of poetry. The classroom exercises originate from salient points in each essay and are numbered accordingly. Each exercise offers an opportunity for the student to experience a particular aspect of poetry. These experiences involve reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The Five-Day Lesson Plan is designed to give the teacher a hands-on, integrated, weeklong set of classroom activities. Each week has an additional activity to reinforce the chapter beyond the confines of a week. The chapter bibliography lists the books in which the poems cited can be found. Also, in some cases, it lists further readings related to the essay topic.

We envision this book as a complete, low-budget guide to the teaching of poetry. By "low-budget" we mean that the teacher can integrate this book with available literature texts and library resources. Books, of course, go out of print so English teachers who use this book may well want to consult with their librarians regularly to help them locate poems and to generally keep up with the literature.

Additionally, teachers who use this book do not need to stand around the photocopier. We advocate reading poems aloud to students at every opportunity and having them write those poems down in their own notebooks (either paper or electronic). There is no more fundamental way to get students to directly experience the language of the poem. Hearing and writing down poems anchors the student in the physicality of language. It represents mental and kinetic engagement. This book's epilogue, "Getting Started," speaks to this issue.

We feel strongly that this book can aid teachers in their struggles with the hydra of curriculum. If the basis of the English classroom is the responsible and expressive articulation of the English language, then poetry, as the art of language, deserves pride of place in the classroom. To cite one of the most basic aspects of poetry, students should know what every word in a poem means. Any word a student does not know should be defined by the student in his or her notebook. Vocabulary is generated within a meaningful context, since the act of reading a poem is a natural and exciting way for a student to make sense of some very carefully chosen words. Thanks to poems, people have been learning new words long before *Hot SAT Words* came along.

Other typical aspects of the English classroom such as grammar can be taught in terms of reading poetry. Poems provide natural contexts for learning; they are not unrelated exercises or drills but purposeful syntheses. Since poets continually rethink basic issues such as punctuation, poems are great places to observe the choices and decisions that confront any user of the English language.

Poems, of course, are of worth in and of themselves. The art of language has many lessons to offer, but poetry can never be reduced to a set of rules. This book can be used in its entirety (for instance, as the basis of an elective class devoted to poetry) or chapter by chapter or exercise by exercise. The teacher, student, and general reader should feel free to use this book as imagination dictates. Imagination is, after all, the heart of poetry.

DAVID CAPPELLA
BARON WORMSER

Introduction

Poetry frightens. Over the years when it has come up in conversation that we write poems, dozens of people from all walks of life have paused and then diffidently or straightforwardly confided that poetry means nothing to them. We have heard in those various voices puzzlement, anger, longing, contempt, and very often a note of betrayal, of having been denied a right that goes with speaking, reading, and writing a language. They have shaken their heads, as if to forswear the very notion of poetry.

In truth, poetry to a degree should frighten. Poems cannot be condensed, systematized, or quantified. Poetry concisely registers on the nerves the whole skein of human emotions. It harrows, enthralls, awes, dazzles, confides. As the African-American poet Walter Dancy has written, "A poet is a mind sailor soul dweller and teller of heartbeats." Poetry in the words of Langston Hughes is "the human soul entire, squeezed like a lemon or lime, drop by drop, into atomic words." According to Nobel prize winner Joseph Brodsky, "Poetry is essentially the soul's search for its release in language."

These are heady definitions but not unfocused ones. Although all three poets use the word "soul," there is nothing fuzzy about that word. The soul is the depth of our being and poetry is one means of sounding that depth. To be sure, not every poem seeks that intensity but as the lives and works of many poets show, poetry emphatically embraces that quest. It isn't fainthearted. It isn't an aspirin or a tonic. It isn't entertainment. A poem doesn't wile away time; it engages our fleetingness and makes it articulate. It seizes time and shapes it.`

This is not to make an idol of poetry. As the literary historian David Bromwich has noted, "We have to think of the poet as nothing more special than a representative of a community of speech, who sometimes recovers a knowledge others repress in order to live. They forget and he [sic] sometimes remembers with a shock, how far we are at once servants and masters of language." There is no idol here and the complaints about poetry are very understandable in the light of the "shock" Bromwich mentions. Poetry has been held to be arcane, immoral, impractical, at once coy and overbearing. What does the poem mean? Why doesn't the poet just say it and get it over with? Why all the breathy mincing and feinting? As a department head once remarked to a then 1st-year teacher of our acquaintance, "Isn't it a bit early in the year to be getting to poetry? It's only November." Thank goodness for prose and grammar exercises.

"Servants and masters of language," "atomic words," "release in language": these are different takes on the same theme. Poetry is the art of language and that is the glorious difficulty of it. To belittle our fears about poetry either by making it cozier and more plainspoken or by elevating it to an unattainable height is no answer. Even at its most expansive Whitmanesque moments, poetry remains an art of essences and essences are unnerving. Poetry is respectably referential it talks about the Boston Red Sox and Route 128 but it also exists unto itself and it cares only for its own perfection the consort of sounds, rhythm, words, form, pauses. Poetry is a very demanding art as the poet is dealing at once with words that exist meaningfully in dictionaries and conversations and newspaper articles and ads and with words as pure, dumb, vocal sounds. Pigment is pigment, musical notes are musical notes, but the words in poems are two-faced, looking both toward the everyday world and that which is art and exists on its own terms.

It is here that teaching typically has failed poetry. The mention of "art" brings to mind, on the one hand, a welter of rules about stanzas and pentameters and, on the other hand, the bogey of subjectivity. The teacher who is bound by rules may lose the spirit of the enterprise; the teacher who goes in fear of subjectivity may scant the texture of art for mind reading ("Who knows what the poet meant?") or retreat to multiple-choice test objectivity ("What sort of sonnet is this?"). The teacher who revels in poetry's subjectivity may have

nothing solid to teach. This is emphatically not to blame teachers. Uncertainties and dogmas are passed on from generation to generation and there is much that is left unsaid and unapproached. That our society prides itself on airing out all manner of once-closeted misapprehensions and avoidances is not a bad thing. Poetry, for one, deserves to be studied as an art.

The critic I. A. Richards put it very clearly when he wrote that "What a poem is is essentially what it does." A poem must be considered an animate body. Its constituent actions are its being. An analogy from the world of sports seems germane. To score a basket in basketball a player must make a series of moves that allow him or her to get a good shot at the hoop. The basket doesn't happen simply because the player wants to score. There are resistances of all sortshands in one's face, one's own less than perfect skills, referees partial to the home team. When the player makes the right moves and executes the shot properly, the player scores. A poem is similar in that a writer is using a series of movesmetaphor here, image there, succinct rhythm at one moment, looser rhythm at another. The resistances are things like dull syntax, cliché, unwanted overtones of words. As with the sport, everything depends on the inspiration and ability of the individual. One can't will oneself to be a Richard Wilbur or Adrienne Rich any more than one can will oneself to be Michael Jordan. One can, however, learn the various moves and the variations on the moves and the variations on the variations: hence our subtitle. The degree of structure varies from poem to poem (and from shot to shot) but the repertoire is as large as the poet's (or athlete's) aspirations.

To study the moves is not to lessen the mystery of the endeavor. It is to switch the focus from the final sum of two points to how one gets to that basket. For poetry the basket has been something called "meaning." "What does the poem mean here, class?" Twenty-five young people tense up simultaneously, start to sweat, look straight ahead or stare desperately into their textbooks wondering what the teacher wants from them, what the right answer is. Ah the joys of poetry! No wonder so many adults dismiss poetry as an ordeal that mercifully lies in the past.

The intent of this book is to delineate the moves. You will not find any talk about what the poem means herein. We have nothing against

meaning *per se*; we simply feel as poets and teachers that the cart tends to be put before the horse. If the reader or auditor has no sense of how poems are put together, meaning can never be more than an abstraction somehow extracted from the mortified poem. For the reader or auditor who has a sense of the moves, meanings take care of themselves. As thoughtful intuitions they are, after all, personal as they should be. Poems make us feel and there is only so much to be gained in explicating feelings. To be able, however, to articulate how one comes to a feeling; what delights, challenges, and perplexes is no little thing. Informed analysis is appreciation. And every reader can try her or his hand as a writer and experience first-hand what it is to try to make a poem. Michael Jordan's genius as a player hasn't stopped anyone from playing basketball. On the contrary, he inspires.

Although one reads and writes a poem for the sake of doing it, poems exist in a social context and have social tasks. Poems are sharers. As they praise, lament, ridicule, narrate, anguish, catalog, commemorate, plead, discourse, wish, regret, take leave, commiserate, confess, charm, protest, teach, and grieve, poems acknowledge bonds that link us as human beings who face life's perennials: grief, joy, evanescence, to cite three mainstays of poetry and face at the same time the particulars that denote a time and a place. The hubbub about meaning (to say nothing about meaning's more sophisticated cousin, theory) may distract us from the position that poems may hold in our day-to-day lives as they offer solace, make us laugh out loud or start crying, instruct or beguile us.

A poem is a gift (as Lewis Hyde has noted in his book about the economies of poetry entitled *The Gift*) and we need in a society that attaches commercial values to every situation to acknowledge how crucial poetry is as a gift upon which no market price can be set. When we share poems of our own devising or others' be it in a classroom or at the kitchen table or by e-mail we honor the social bonds of poetry. We steadily need light and food and water and air, but at all manner of moments we need the nurture of poems. It is sad how few of us are able to avail ourselves.

A corollary of poetry's social nature is that as an art existing in time, poetry changes. This may seem to go without saying but many people do not hesitate to define poetry by some unyielding rule of

thumb such as "Poetry must rhyme" or "Poetry must be in meter." These notions are imbibed in classrooms and it is quite possible over a lifetime to never further encounter poetry and thus preserve old saws. In fact, the beauty of poetry in twentieth-century America has been the degree to which it has refreshed every aspect of the art as it has addressed every aspect of life. It has embraced without compunctions the diversity of human experience.

Indeed if we look at history, it is plain that the agony of World War I shattered the genteel murmur of what once was called "poesy." It seems a tenable generalization to say that the work of American twentieth-century poetry has been to honor the fragments of the century's damnable wars, its race hatreds and genocides, its belittlement of the value of the individual life. As poetry has been constructed of fragments (initially and most famously in *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot), poets have been careful to distance themselves from sheer eloquence. The poem of rhetorical exhortation of which the nineteenth century was so fond died in the mud and thunder and poison gas of World War I, to say nothing of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. There is great pith in the fragments of human experience and poetry has kept faith with them. What is especially exciting is how many previously marginalized voices have taken hold of poetry and emphatically made it their own. American poetry is all the richer for the multiplicity of our voices.

Canons without living cultures are worthless and students whose educations are limited to brisk tours of canonical texts may wonder what it all has to do with their own worlds. How does one appraise art without canonical road signs? Do students have access to cultures beyond commercial ones in their own lives? Is the classroom providing them with that access? How democratic is art in a democracy?

Every teacher cares about standards and the above questions posit the testing of standards. Works of art are made of discrete elements; they are at once the sum of those elements and more than they are. The work of evaluation is never to be discarded on the grounds that it is subjective. The joy of being articulate about an art lies in part in being able to discuss why one likes a poem according to how it works as a poem. Or dislikes it because it doesn't work. Intelligent disagreement about the standards of practice is a source of genuine culture and the

soul of the humane classroom that recognizes the validity of individual responses. If the ways of artistry are infinite, the aspects of an art are modestly finite. To return to the basketball court, one can dribble all sorts of ways but the ball still has to bounce up and down, up and down. Standards are not confining rules; they are models of the attainable. They are practical ideals.

Cultures are literally media that promote growth. Cultures are soil and that is the physical note on which we wish to end this introduction. For poetry is above all a physical experience. It is the stuff of sound and rhythm and speech, of muscle and voice box and vision and breath and pulse. It affects us physically when we speak it and listen to it. Without that physical basis there is no poetry. As we move through the many aspects of the art of poetry, let us not forget our bodies. All the moves are physical motions.

1 Rhythm

Summary

Rhythm is the key physical basis of poetry. It is what gets a poem into us; it is visceral. Since English is an accentual-syllabic language, the play of those accents among the words that make up a poem's lines is a main determiner of rhythm. In traditional English-language poetry, accents are patterned so as to form meters in which each line has a definite number of accented units. In the free-verse poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, accent is looser and embodies the provisional, moment-by-moment quality of daily living and speaking. Free verse is less arch and dramatic than meter; it is more conversational and open-ended. Whereas meter keeps a beat, the rhythms of free verse insinuate themselves.

There is no more subtly powerful compeller than rhythm. Rhythm literally defines life for us as human beings: Blood circulates within us, we breathe in and out, we lie down and get up, we chew our food and walk down the street and make love, and for decades of their lives half of the human race menstruates each month. Rhythm is all around us and woven into us in the seasons, day and night, tides, lives and deaths. Living in Maine, we feel the winter solstice as a rhythmic depth, a near stillness, whereas the summer solstice is the elongated height of light. The equinoxes are poises, fulcrums, balances. (1)

Rhythms are surging, liling, insistent, and we humans convey all manner of rhythm as we chat, dance, strut, orate, sing, clap hands, whistle, drum, run, chant. Rhythm expresses emotions that range

from a parent's intimate, calming pat on an infant's back to the chilling, mass display of goose-stepping Nazis. Rhythm is the motive feeling of the life force, the "green fuse" as Dylan Thomas (a very great rhythmmer) put it. In poems rhythm is capable of producing trance-like states of mind. Rhythm puts us so deeply into ourselves that we may feel we are outside of ourselves. (2) In the section of N. Scott Momaday's poem "New World" printed below, the reader is made to experience the primal pulse of life-energy in lines that are as rhythmically stark as is possible typically one accent for each of the two syllables that make up each line:

At noon
 turtles
 enter
 slowly
 into
 the warm
 dark loam.
 Bees hold
 the swarm.
 Meadows
 recede
 through planes
 of heat
 and pure
 distance.

The stillness of the scene absorbs and mesmerizes us; we hear a beat that is, at once, insistent and minimal. It is as if Momaday captured on the page the very rhythm of time. There is no racing through the poem, each line though it is little more than a second will have its say. (3)

As an oral and mnemonic art poetry always has honored the force of rhythm. Poems are meant to be spoken aloud and the rhythmic force communicated in a poem insists on the passion in the human voice. Every poem is the movement of words in time and that movement as it embodies the particular soundscape of a particular language conveys some

shade of rhythm, from the tight structure of meter to the amble of colloquial cadence. A monotone seems inhuman and the adjective is a term of opprobrium because a monotone rejects the rhythmic pulse of being. The vocal rises and falls that distinguish human utterances, the stuff of pitch, energy, and loudness, are part of the body's instinctive rhythmic feeling. Every articulation from an elaborate oration that piles orotund clause upon orotund clause to a simple exclamation ("Yikes!") bespeaks rhythm. (4)

English is an accentual-syllabic language and it is no exaggeration to say that it is a language with a built-in pulse. All multi-syllabic English words have an accent; long ones have a primary and a secondary accent. As for monosyllables, one cannot go through three of them without accenting at least one of them to some degree (unless, of course, one speaks in a lifeless monotone). English abhors a rhythmic vacuum. To say "for the sake of our dogs" is to voice a readily discernible accentual texture, as "sake" and "dogs" seem relatively strong in relation to their companion words. The syllables we speak are rising and falling, falling and rising, always surging and lolling on the throbbing tide of rhythm. To the force of dictionary-defined accent, there is always being added the pressure of human meaning. (5)

The simplest and strongest rhythm is that of alternation: Tides rise and ebb, valves open and shut, feet (and hooves) go up and down. Duple rhythm (as it is called) is the rhythm of alternation and it has been the workhorse of English-language poetry. One syllable is relatively stronger than the other syllable, thus an accented syllable follows an unaccented syllable, an accented syllable follows an unaccented syllable. This relative strength may be patterned (weak/strong, weak/strong, weak/strong) to create a momentum that is, at once, brisk and lulling, that creates a trance of sorts. This is the rhythm of the majority of metrical poems in English and any reader of poetry will have her or his favorite that comes immediately to mind. We have always especially liked Shakespeare's "Sonnet 30," which begins:

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
 I summon up remembrance of things past,
 I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
 And with old woes new wail my dear times' waste . . .