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FLEAS, FRAGMENTS, AND OTHER IMPEDIMENTS TO READING POETRY

Linda Wyman

Students who are intimidated by poetry haunt my memory— and stare me in the face— each year when I assign my first poems. Happily, among those daunting Ghosts of Classes Past I can see also the students who shed their fears and became informed and independent readers, quite a few of them able to write about poetry with insight and eloquence. As classes begin, I try to remind myself of what we English teachers can do to enable our students to read poems with understanding and joy.

We must remember, for one thing, that most of our students will not realize that reading poetry is something that can be learned. When a friend and I bought a sailboat, and I confessed that I'd never sailed, she said, "Don't worry—it comes with a book." Even people who believe, with the greatest faith, that almost anything can be learned—and that many things can be learned simply by reading about them— will not think that one can *learn* to understand poetry. They think it "just happens" that some persons, usually blonde girls who also like math, are "good at poetry" and that others aren't— that it's somehow genetic. It's not. One of the things we have to do, then, is to help our students realize that there are some definite things to learn about reading poems.

And then, of course, **we have to help them realize what kinds of things can be learned and what differences these things can make.** Do you remember, for instance, when you first read Keats' "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" and discovered how important it is to start with the title of the poem? And to look up words that you don't know the meaning of? To be alert to the *connotations* of words and to determine which meaning of a word is relevant by taking into account the context in which that word appears? And so on. Those are definite things to be learned about reading poems, the sorts of things we must teach our students.

Furthermore, **we must remember that few of our students realize that Art is related to Life—that life experiences are to be used in the reading of poems.** Consequently, when the meaning of a poem is not immediately clear, our students may assume that they themselves have some vague, cloudy “poetic disability” as yet unaddressed by the grants that fund other LD programs. For example, a person who has never killed a flea may have trouble with John Donne’s “The Flea” precisely for that reason; **the “trouble” with a poem might not be “poetic” at all.** And so our students may follow Donne’s object lesson to his beloved through two stanzas and then fall apart in the third, when Donne says,

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?

When students fall apart, they are quick to mutter such self-deprecating lines as “I’m just not very metaphysical”—or worse, to generalize their misery into “I can’t read poems.” What hope we will give them if we can get them to understand that it’s not the nature of *poetry* that they don’t know but rather the nature of *fleas*—and, in particular, of flea-killing. They must learn how to use the thumbnail to break the flighty and offending flea in half. (How realistic such a demonstration is to be, I leave to teacher discretion.) Conquering fleas may give our students the courage they need to get on with reading poems.

We must help our students to know that often their failure to understand a poem is actually a failure to allow themselves to be jarred by a word or a line that is slightly on tilt. Back to “Chapman’s Homer,” for instance. When students read “Round many western islands have I been / Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold,” they may— even after looking up “bards” and “fealty” and “Apollo,” and after ruling out Apollo-sun-god in favor of Apollo, god of poetry—fail to perceive what’s going on unless they ask themselves, “When was a poet ever in charge of anything?” Allowing oneself to be jarred is often a precondition to one’s becoming enlightened. Indeed, it may permit one to know one of the most important things that can ever be learned about reading poetry: when to make a metaphoric leap. If students will wonder what poets were ever in charge of, their own knowledge of poets barely able to support themselves will probably lead them to say, “Poets were

never in charge of anything but poems." If that's so, then the speaker in "Chapman's Homer" must be saying, "I've read lots of great poems, many of them Greek." **Students must learn that the poem will tell them when to leap, if they'll but listen to it with all of their hearing, mind, heart, life experience, and common sense.**

Similarly, no matter how well students may have followed Browning's Duke of Ferrara through the first 47 lines in which he reveals his last Duchess's portrait and discusses her employment of the Equal Opportunity Act, they will never understand what the poetic situation is or just how shrewd and corrupt the Duke and the father of his intended bride are unless they allow themselves to be jarred when the Duke says, in line 48, "I repeat"—and then goes on to say something that they've never heard before. Only their attention to those two words will lead them to realize with whom the Duke is speaking and exactly what sordid things his mind (and, as far as he knows, all minds) is made of.

We must also not neglect to help all of our students know what one of my students once blurted in wonderment: "Poems are written in English sentences!" I have been given the most astonishing responses to the question, "Are there any passages that you want to raise questions about?" "Yes," a student said. "What about line 7 in 'To His Coy Mistress'?" Line 7 reads:

Of Humber would complain. I would

with no period at the end. It is not surprising that the student, reading in lines rather than in sentences, found it troublesome. Students are not conscious of what they know, and what they use all the non-literary day long, about English syntax. If they are not conscious of syntax-at-work, then syntax for them is no glorious provider of structure, no felicitous indicator of nuance. We must not let them read poems a line at a time. We must teach them to unscramble syntax—to find subjects and verbs, antecedents of pronouns, etc.—any time a passage in a poem makes no sense. This, in fact, is why to teach them grammar at all: to allow them to read absolutely anything. We must help them, then, to see that the opening *when* clause of Shakespeare's Sonnet 15

When I consider everything that grows
Holds in perfection but a little moment . . .

and the parallel *when* clause that follows it in the fifth and sixth lines

When I perceive that man as plants increase,
Cheered and checked e'en by the selfsame sky . . .

are bound to be followed by a clause with the sense of "then," just as it's been happening all their lives: "When Dad gets home, (then) we'll have dinner." Their anticipation of reaching the *then* clause will lead them through the eight lines that it takes to get to that point, and they'll be delighted, and perhaps a bit smug, when it arrives:

Then the conceit of this inconstant stay
Sets you most rich in youth before my sight . . .

Our students must be taught to look for *sentences* and be reminded of the syntactic clues that they know and use all the time in order to arrive at meaning.

Finally, we must remember that a great impediment to our students' learning how to read poems for themselves may be, God save us, what we know about the poem at hand and cannot keep from telling them. Recently a teacher who'd been teaching "My Last Duchess" brought me a hilarious sentence written by one of his students. The student was trying to comment on the closing lines of the poem:

Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

In her discussion, the student referred to "Sir Notice Neptune." My colleague and I roared with laughter over the incongruity of finding in Browning's poem a displaced person who sounded as if he had matriculated in Sheridan's *School for Scandal*. My friend, in near despair, lamented, "And I *told* them about the Count's emissary to whom the Duke was speaking!" Well, he shouldn't have; that's just the hard truth of it. His inability not to tell about his own flawless reading of the poem had, in effect, stood in his student's way, however priceless a misstatement it had given rise to.

What happens in poems, and in people who read them, is at last a mystery. Our business as teachers of poetry is to teach our students the things that can be taught, making sure that the mystery does not come until the last.

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