Why Teach Poetry?

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As I look back on my thirty-seven years as a school-master in both the maintained and the private sector I am increasingly aware that teaching poetry was my favourite activity by far. I think that it was the dealing with the intensity of language that attracted me most of all: the pearl-like solidity of words that were held along the linear chains clicking their spell-binding rhythms. I found that pupils of all ages loved the way in which words connected their sense of the ‘here’ with their dawning awareness of the ‘there’ and how those words established a presence connecting the particular and the indefinite. With those things in mind I hope that this article might be a useful reassurance to those starting out in the world of pedagogy when they may feel bound down by the imprisoning sense of assessment and lesson objectives, work-schemes and the pull to reduce poetry to examinable meaning. I have long held that the teaching of poetry is not about de-coding a puzzle, solving an obscure statement by translating it into the world of the already-known. If poetry is merely a complicated way of saying what is ordinary, where the teacher and pupils unwrap the poetic language in order to arrive at the sweet in the middle, then it is a fairly paltry affair akin to either the crossword puzzle on the back page of the daily paper or the latest Sudoku twister to keep the mind busy and the complexities of real living at bay.

Step by step

A poem which I have often started with in Year 9 is Robert Graves’s four-line gem, ‘Love without Hope’:

   Love without hope, as when the young bird-catcher  
   Swept off his tall hat to the Squire’s own daughter,  
   So let the imprisoned larks escape and fly  
   Singing about her head, as she rode by.

In order to bring attention to the particularity of language I would ask pupils to stand up and act out the young man’s action. How did he take off his hat? It certainly wasn’t a polite tipping of the brim, a touching of
the forelock, and I shall always remember a young boy in a Leeds classroom coming out to the front turning to the other twenty-eight boys and flamboyantly sweeping off his imaginary hat so that his hand gracefully swept the floor. There was such ebullience, such sheer joie de vivre in the gesture, and, in terms of the poem’s narrative, such release of delight. Looking at a poem is about learning to read; you have to examine words carefully, look at their context, be precise. In terms of the Graves poem the pupils have to think about why the hat should be ‘tall’ for a ‘bird-catcher’ and what the inevitable consequences will be of sweeping it off with such éclat. We would look closely at the use of the word ‘own’ in line two and what this suggests about the unapproachability of the young lady; the manner in which the scene is set with the bird-catcher on the ground and the Squire’s daughter on a horse. We would discuss what is suggested by the release of the larks which are ‘imprisoned’ and why they sing ‘about her head’ as she is in the process of moving past him. Again it was a young Leeds boy who gave the opinion that since the poor man couldn’t speak to the wealthy girl all he could do was offer her his own day’s work, the collection of birds which constituted his job, whilst someone else chipped in that maybe the birds were like his thoughts. Since he couldn’t say ‘Wow, you’re beautiful’ he offered her instead the singing which circled around her: what was in his head goes to her head, his thoughts transferred. And yet there is so much more: why is it called ‘Love without Hope’? What is the effect of the imperative opening of the third line? What is achieved by ending the third and fourth lines with those two monosyllabic sounds ‘fly’ and ‘by’?

One of the statements about poetry which I have lived with for years is that opening of Book 1 of William Carlos Williams’s Paterson:

—Say it, no ideas but in things—
nothing but the blank faces of the houses
and cylindrical trees
bent, forked by preconception and accident—
split, furrowed, creased, mottled, stained—
secret—into the body of the light!

Of course words are not things; they are the memory of things and it is a study of objects that leads the reader ‘into the body of the light’; a movement from ‘here’ to ‘there’, from ‘now’ to ‘then’. I always discovered that pupils are fascinated with the connections between words and so the study of poetry becomes a pathway leading to a fuller understanding of the complex interweaving of our vocabulary. For instance, another short piece of poetry which I have presented to Year 9 pupils has been those lines from Macbeth when the usurping King of Scotland is looking forward
to the murder of his friend Banquo with a mixture of expectation and control:

Come, seeling Night,
Skarfe up the tender Eye of pitiful Day,
And with thy bloodie and invisible Hand
Cancel and teare to pieces that great Bond,
Which keeps me pale. Light thickens,
And the Crow makes Wing toth’Rookie Wood:
Good things of Day begin to droope, and drowse,
Whiles Nights black Agents to their Prey’s doe rowse.

I have always tried to use the First Folio text because of the strangeness of the spelling, that sense of distance which it sets between the classroom and these powerful incantatory words, emphasising the need to look carefully at each word in turn, words as descriptions of things. A brief account of the connection between ‘seeling’ and the sowing up of the eyelids of hawks as a prelude to training them leads inevitably to the emphasis upon blindness, literally hoodwinking. As the reader recognises the ‘Eye of Day’ as being the sun I have invariably produced a digression to mention the derivation of the name of one of the commonest of wild flowers, the daisy, whose name comes from the ‘day’s-eye’, appropriate not only to its yellow centre and white rays but also to its way of closing up as the sun goes down. The blinding of both the sun, leading to a darkness of night where crime can take place with impunity and of a human being whose vulnerability is exposed, has a violence which is caught by that emphatic ‘Skarfe’. Much discussion always took place about the nature of this ‘Bond’ which is ripped up and what it is that prevents us from simply committing murder whenever we want to exert our power over others. This in turn compelled us to examine whether it is good to be ‘pale’ and whether we would wish for that darkness which allows us to cover up those instincts of human compassion which make us into social creatures. ‘Light thickens’: one of the most startlingly effective short statements about how a winter’s afternoon disappears with oncoming night made even more eerie with its association with blood that thickens after it has been let out of the body! The image of the black crow and the ‘Rookie Wood’ prompted interesting observations about the solitary nature of carrion crows as opposed to the gregarious nesting of those other members of the same genus, rooks, whose nests are collected together as if for both safety and comfort near the tops of trees. The final couplet has a musical, incantatory sound as the vulnerability of drowsing is juxtaposed with the waking up of evil which will ensure that sleepers never wake again!
I am not suggesting for one moment that my intention in looking closely at these lines is a way of short-circuiting any requirement to look at Shakespeare as a dramatist. That said I have found time and again that one can overcome a classroom’s sheer incomprehension of the ‘Great Bard’ (required study as emphasised by our political masters who know everything about the needs of pupils and educational standards) by using this way of trying to break down language into something which becomes pertinent to life nowadays without losing its mystery of strangeness. In a similar way I have found that looking at contemporary poetry with Year 9 can be rewarding when one moves away from the world of preparing them for the sort of booklets handed out by examination boards for GCSE. Instead of the world of U.A. Fanthorpe or Simon Armitage I have always preferred the demanding strangeness of poetry that is unlikely to crop up in the officially-recognised canon. The American Gary Snyder for instance.

*Use of English* readers can access the English Association poetry website where they will find a subheading about ‘tracing patterns’ and here they can see how Snyder’s ‘Above Pate Valley’ can be used as a pathway into new worlds. The poem comes from a volume which Snyder published in 1959 titled *Riprap* and pupils will need to be told about how a riprap is a set of cobbles laid, stones up a mountainside: ‘a cobble of stone laid on steep slick rock/to make a trail for horses in the mountains’. I used to ask the pupils to think of the idea of words as stones and the poem as a pathway being laid down line by line: narrative sequence can be traced step by step allowing them to pick up quite easily on an accumulation of a world of objects which gives a feeling of human belonging within a landscape. The connection between the height of the mountain range, Yosemite Park, at the beginning of the poem (‘Two thousand feet’) and the historical time at the end (‘Ten thousand years’) prompts the reflection on how history and geography are connected: time and distance! The riprap becomes itself a definition of poetry and the clear edges of the cobbles take the reader, line by line, into a world of extraordinary clarity where a sense of ‘then’ and ‘now’ is interwoven.

‘Marin-An’, a short poem of Snyder’s from the late 1950s, makes an ideal introduction to this remarkable Beat poet whose work is closely connected with a vivid sense of what it is to be fully alive to the world around:

sun breaks over the eucalyptus

grove below the wet pasture,

water’s about hot,
I sit in the open window
& roll a smoke
distant dogs bark, a pair of
cawing crows; the twang
of a pygmy nuthatch high in a pine—
from behind the cypress windrow
the mare moves up, grazing.

a soft continuous roar
comes out of the far valley
of the six-lane highway—thousands
and thousands of cars
driving men to work.

Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac stayed in a part-finished cabin outside Mill Valley in the Yosemite in 1956 and Snyder gave it the name ‘Marin An’ from the Japanese for ‘Horse Grove Hermitage’. I have looked at this poem with more than one Year 10 class (despite that very un-pe reference to rolling a cigarette) and found that the accumulation of sounds and sights has registered a feeling for landscape and human consciousness within it. The movement from the direct opening ‘sun breaks’ to the leisurely drift over of line one to line two with its sight of dew on the meadow has a quietness to it which sets the scene for the particularity of noise and sight in the second stanza. The dogs’ barking brings a human world to life whilst the noise of both crow and nuthatch is felt in the verbs: sharp noise punctuating the early morning. That leisurely sense of awakening life is conveyed in the steadiness of the tenth line and this leads to the soft, unstoppable intrusion of movement in the third stanza to such an extent that one is almost called to echo those unforgettable lines from Part I of Eliot’s The Waste Land:

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.

This quotation from Eliot is quite deliberate. One aspect of teaching poetry in the way I am suggesting is that it allowed me to keep referring to other poems. I am not suggesting that a Year 10 class should be faced with reading Eliot’s enormously influential introduction of Modernism but there is absolutely no harm in pushing them on to just think of other things and so I recall mentioning Dante’s Inferno in this context and telling a group of Year 10 boys about that endless circling. In fact one of the common sights in the centre of Leeds on a winter’s afternoon during the
1980s was the enormous number of starlings flying together in a cloud of
circular movement around the Town Hall and I pointed them out to boys
from the window of my room in Leeds Grammar School and told them of
Canto V:

and as the wings of starlings in the winter
bear them along in wide-spread, crowded flocks,
so does that wind propel the evil spirits:

now here, then there, and up and down, it drives them
with never any hope to comfort them—
hope not of rest but even of suffering less.

Let me conclude this section of ‘first steps’ by again shocking the
unambitious or nervous reader. With Year 10 I also mentioned W.S.
Graham’s 1970 poem, ‘Malcolm Mooney’s Land’ with its opening lines of
steps across the snow:

Today, Tuesday, I decided to move on
Although the wind was veering. Better to move
Than have them at my heels, poor friends
I buried earlier under the printed snow.
From wherever it is I urge these words
To find their subtle vents, the northern dazzle
Of silence cranes to watch. Footprint on foot
Print, word on word and each on a fool’s errand.

**Atmosphere**

I have found that one of the most successful evocations of mood and
atmosphere has been the first of Eliot’s ‘Preludes’:

The winter evening settles down
With smell of steaks in passageways.
Six o’clock.
The burnt-out ends of smoky days.
And now a gusty shower wraps
The grimy scraps
Of withered leaves about your feet
And newspapers from vacant lots;
The showers beat
On broken blinds and chimney-pots,
And at the corner of the street
A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps.

And then the lighting of the lamps.

I have used these lines time and again with a Year 9 class not worrying about the fact that T.S. Eliot occurs on the A level syllabus. These lines glimmer with an atmosphere that doesn’t need the background information of Eliot’s reading of fin-de-siècle French poetry. Instead we have looked at direct questions which open up how language conveys meaning. And this is one of the central points about the teaching of poetry: after the class has worked out what is going on the most important next step is to identify how the poet conveys his meanings, his effects. What effect does that word ‘settles’ have in line one and how justly does it convey a sense of the day’s end? What effect does the staccato third line have and does it suggest anything to the reader about the way time is perceived in the poem? Does the image of a cigarette-end in line four herald a shift of mood and, if it does, do the following four lines encourage that shift to flow forward? What words in the poem suggest isolation and bleakness to contrast with that opening ‘settles’? Is the space left between lines twelve and thirteen important? Would there be any change of mood if that space were to be removed? Many of these questions are about precise use of language not simply about vocabulary and I have always wanted pupils to understand the reason for quoting correctly. A poem is a constructed piece of language printed on the white page and if you change the word-order, misread the line endings, leave out any punctuation, leave out gaps then you are making the poem into something different. You never know you might be making something which has a significant value in its own right but at least be aware of the effect of your changes, don’t make them because you have failed to notice the precise lay-out of what the poet wanted! All of which goes back to that central responsibility of the teacher of English: teach the art of close-reading.

I often used to compare the Eliot poem with one of Hardy’s lyrics from 1913, ‘Exeunt Omnes’:

I

Everybody else, then, going,
And I still left where the fair was?
Much have I seen of neighbor loungers
Making a lusty showing,
Each now past all knowing.

II
There is an air of blankness
In the street and the littered spaces;
Thoroughfare, steeple, bridge and highway
Wizen themselves to lankness;
Kennels dribble dankness.

III
Folk all fade. And whither,
As I wait alone where the fair was?
Into the clammy and numbing night-fog
Whence they entered hither.
Soon do I follow thither!

I still find this an immensely moving poem and one doesn’t have to register that its author was seventy-three when he wrote it to recognize the timeless folk-song element, lyrical evocation of time’s movement which leaves one increasingly wondering where everyone else has now gone. About that opening line I have often asked pupils to consider what the difference might be had the poet written the word ‘gone’ instead of ‘going’ and what layers of suggestion there are with that word ‘still’ in line two. How does the domestic immediacy of presence contrast with realization of loss in that reference to ‘neighbour loungers’? This is a poem that may well need some basic explication and I have certainly found myself giving a translation of the title. In addition a word like ‘wizen’ or ‘lankness’ has required some help although, interestingly, with a bit of encouragement I have found pupils quite capable of arriving at a sense of what some word means through an understanding of its context. In one of my many digressions, I have mentioned the Old English charm about the removal of warts as they shrivel, becoming wizened, as well as presenting the class with a copy of the moment from Bede’s History of the English Church and People, written in the early part of the eighth century, where man’s life is compared with that of a sparrow:

Your majesty, when we compare the present life of man on earth with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter’s day with your thanes and counselors. In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside, the
storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came. Even so, man appears on earth for a little while; but of what went before this life or of what follows, we know nothing.

The simplicity of Hardy’s lines is their power: ‘Folk all fade’. They don’t ‘disappear’ or ‘vanish’; the movement from the ‘fair’ is gradual and the memories of all that had gone on there is hauntingly evoked with the reference to ‘littered’. At this point you might cry ‘but it’s all so sad’; after all these are only young people of between thirteen and fifteen and so, bearing that in mind, I often contrasted Hardy’s bleakness with the same poet’s later affirmation of the continuity of life’s values in his poem from 1915, ‘In Time of “The Breaking of Nations”:’

I
Only a man harrowing clods
In a slow silent walk
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
   Half asleep as they stalk.

II
Only thin smoke without flame
   From the heaps of couch-grass;
Yet this will go onward the same
   Though Dynasties pass.

III
Yonder a maid and her wight
   Come whispering by:
War’s annals will cloud into night
   Ere their story die.

I always had to explain why a gardener would burn couch-grass rather than allowing it to rot down (its tenacity as a weed is almost second-to-none!) and how the word ‘wight’ derives from the Old English wiht, a living being. However, I soon found that pupils picked up very quickly the wonderfully quiet sense of optimism that lies behind that archaic word and its juxtaposition with the immediacy of the two lovers who whisper those things to each other that are the same now as ever.
The thousand things

And so to Year 11 and to see what I could sneak in without being noticed by the poetry-police who present our adolescents with a clear understanding of what poetry is as represented by the booklets handed out by the examination boards. After all if you believe, as I do, that poetry is absolutely central to our lives then you have a responsibility to fire a sense of engagement: poetry is about life not about examinable ‘meanings’ and no poet worth his salt ever wrote either for professional critics or for an examination syllabus. Well, I often sneaked in a modern poem of which I am very fond, Christopher Middleton’s ‘The Thousand Things’:

Dry vine leaves burn in an angle of the wall.  
Dry vine leaves and a sheet of paper, overhung by the green vine.  
From an open grate in an angle of the wall 
dry vine leaves and dead flies send smoke up into the green vine where grape clusters go ignored by lizards. Dry vine leaves 
and a few dead flies on fire 
and a Spanish toffee spat into an angle of the wall 
make a smell that calls to mind the thousand things. Dead flies go, paper curls and flares, Spanish toffee sizzles and the smell has soon gone over the wall.

A naked child jumps over the threshold, waving a green spray of leaves of vine.

What I love about this simple poem is the accumulation of detail, the repetition which moves us forward. That opening statement has such particularity which locks us for a moment in the world of clearing the past in preparation for the future: burning the dry leaves which have either collected in an angle of the wall or have been brushed there. The second line ends with the thrust forward after the comma’s brief pause and ‘overhung’ glides us into new growth. This is all so visual: the grate which holds the burning leaves merges with the movement of smoke that infiltrates the new clusters of grapes. I often asked what the effect of such repetition is: four references to ‘dry’, two to ‘dead flies’ and yet the movement is all towards new life, ‘go’, ‘curls’, ‘flares’, ‘sizzles’ before that moment of magic when the smell ‘has soon gone over the wall’ to be
followed by the jumping of the naked child ‘over the threshold’
wavering a green spray of leaves of vine.

It is of little use to ask ‘what does this poem mean?’ It just is itself. You might as well ask what the meaning is of a still life painting by Chardin or Basho’s famous 1686 frog haiku:

an ancient pond—
a frog leaps in,
the sound of water.

Christopher Middleton’s poem breathes echoes of the particular and I often followed it by looking closely at Coleridge’s 1797 poem, ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’. One of Coleridge’s finest ‘Conversation Poems’ it is too long to discuss in detail here but if I refer to the lines in the third section in which the poet reconciles himself to missing out on the walk with his friends you will perhaps see what I mean by linking the two:

A delight
Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad
As I myself were there! Nor in this bower,
This little lime-tree bower, have I not mark’d
Much that has soothe’d me. Pale beneath the blaze
Hung the transparent foliage; and I watch’d
Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov’d to see
The shadow of the leaf and stem above
Dappling its sunshine! And that walnut-tree
Was richly ting’d, and a deep radiance lay
Full on the ancient ivy, which usurps
Those fronting elms, and now, with blackest mass
Makes their dark branches gleam a lighter hue
Through the late twilight: and though now the bat
Wheels silent by, and not a swallow twitters,
Yet still the solitary humble-bee
Sings in the bean-flower! Henceforth I shall know
That Nature ne’er deserts the wise and pure;
No plot so narrow, be but Nature there,
No waste so vacant, but may well employ
Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart
Awake to Love and Beauty! and sometimes
’Tis well to be bereft of promis’d good,
That we may lift the soul, and contemplate
With lively joy the joys we cannot share.
We have moved a long way forward from the world of Robert Graves’s young bird-catcher but I think that there is a path connecting these poems and although the language Coleridge uses is more demanding we are as teachers preparing pupils to read for Life! If our pupils go on to study English Literature at A level or, after that, at university then we must encourage them to engage with those linked words which do not simply respond to the squeezing for meaning required by GCSE. Coleridge’s concentration upon the world of particularity that notes the contrast between the blackness of the ivy in the evening light and the ‘lighter hue’ of the elm’s branches is the poet’s eye and mind totally engaged with what surrounds him. The sounds move between the twitter of a swallow and the lower register contained in the very name of the ‘humble-bee’ whilst the world’s movement is caught upon the instant by the bat’s flight that opens the line ‘Wheels silent by’.

Reading is an activity which should engage the whole of our concentration and as I look back upon my career I hope that some of what I may have imparted is to do with this engagement. I have wanted my pupils to know that Life is Here and Now or it is nowhere and that I firmly believe those words from the conclusion of D.H. Lawrence’s late poem, ‘Thought’:

Thought is not a trick, or an exercise, or a set of dodges,
Thought is a man in his wholeness wholly attending.