

Can Poetry be Taught?

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Polonius: What do you read, my lord?

Hamlet: Words, words, words.

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, n.d

The question in the title of this paper has been addressed in different ways (Perrine, 1963, pp. 3-246; Birk&Birk, 1965, pp. 366-88; Kramer, 1968, pp. i-xviii; Panda, 2014, pp. 149-89), so I do not expect the reader to find anything startlingly new in it except, perhaps, some points of interest from my own experience as a teacher. Students are often told at the beginning of the session that poetry cannot be “taught” like Commerce or Mathematics. However, since poetry is written using familiar words they need not be intimidated by the subject but rather, they can look forward to the pleasure they will feel while traversing a terrain that has no formidable obstacles. As they will probably discover, the poems in their syllabus will awaken their interest, sensitivity and self-awareness on account of the poets’ adroit use of well-known words, while simultaneously creating a new kind of language to surprise, delight, and define areas of experience hitherto unsuspected to exist.

For example, the four opening lines of “Village Song” by Sarojini Naidu are skilfully woven together to form a composite whole: “Full are my pitchers and far to carry,/Lone is the way and long,/Why, O why was I tempted to tarry, /Lured by the boatmen’s song?” (Naidu, 2007, p. 150). Deceptively simple and seemingly effortlessly composed in dactyl metre with the taut rhyme scheme of *abab*, these lines are

actually a triumph of verbal legerdemain. The predicate in each of the first two lines precedes the subject—an unusual syntactical inversion—thus emphasizing the girl’s anxiety as darkness falls. This is followed by the alliteration of “lone” “long” and “lured”, and “tempted” and “tarry”, the long vowels and repetitive sound effects suggestive of time passing. Further, perhaps “lured” and “tempted” subtly hint at the girl’s awakening romantic yearnings. W.H. Auden remarked that the sign of a writer having “a genuine original talent is that he is more interested in playing with words than in saying something original” (Auden, 1962, p. 31). The earlier stanza by Sarojini Naidu is a fine instance of this observation.

A line will take us hours maybe;

Yet if it does not seem a moment’s thought,

Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.

(Yeats, 1958, p. 88)

The role of a teacher is to help a student analyse words and their combination while appreciating the poet’s craftsmanship. Memorable poetry does not make any claims to absolute truth, as do the empirical subjects mentioned above, but rather, it alludes to human truth. Prose, not poetry, is the language of absolute truth. Sir Isaac Newton’s *Three Laws of Motion*, the *Indian Constitution*, the *Penal Code*, or Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital*, among others, are in prose. Had they been in verse, they would long

ago have been regarded as fossilized curiosities. Language is a complex vehicle of communication, more so in poetry than in prose, the reason being that poetry—through innuendo, metonymy, and other verbal devices—explores our feelings and emotions such as nostalgia, creeping age, frustration, ecstasy, and much else besides.

As Coleridge observes, “A poem contains the same elements as a prose composition; the difference therefore must consist in a different combination of them, in consequence of a different object proposed” (Coleridge, 1962, p. 171). An analogy from architecture will clarify this point. Imagine two stacks of identical bricks. Using the bricks from one stack, a mason builds a godown; from the other stack an architect constructs the Taj Mahal.

We constantly use words, but the poet uses them with studied effect and an extraordinary skill that may be likened to a master carpenter who, from a block of wood hewed from the stump of a tree, makes a Chippendale chair; or a sculptor who, out of shapeless marble, creates the statue of Apollo. As with the carpenter or sculptor whose source material is crude wood or marble, the poet’s source is the most banal of all books—the dictionary.

Theseus : And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

(A Midsummer Night’s Dream, 5.1.14-17)

We may well ask whether imagination and inspiration are not important features that go into the making of a poem. Certainly they are, but they should feature strictly within the domain of the poet’s private mental landscape, conscious or subconscious, and not be easily

accessible to the reader. All that we as readers have before us therefore is the “local habitation and a name” or, in other words, the poem as a language artefact. If the idea of “free verse” popularized by Walt Whitman meant for some poets, an emancipation from earlier restraints, there were others who had the skill to conform in a new way to the traditional framework by a deliberate dislocation of conventions, and thus achieve forceful utterance and felicitous expression, among them being Archibald MacLeish whose poem “You, Andrew Marvell” (MacLeish, 1963, p. 72) is an outstanding blend of the traditional with the experimental.

As a US member of the League of Nations posted in Persia (now Iran) in 1926, MacLeish was informed of his eighty-eight-year-old father’s illness back home in Glencoe, Illinois, overlooking Lake Michigan. He immediately set out for home, travelling by rail, car, and ship—air travel was still in the future. “I saw my father,” he writes, “and went to the edge of the bluff above Lake Michigan among the sunflowers and lay ‘face down’”:

*And here face down beneath the sun
And here upon earth’s noonward height
To feel the always coming on
The always rising of the night:*

*To feel creep up the curving east
The earthly chill of dusk and slow
Upon those under lands the vast
And ever-climbing shadow grow*

*And strange at Ecbatan the trees
Take leaf by leaf the evening strange
The flooding dark about their knees
The mountains over Persia change*

*And now at Kermanshah the gate
Dark empty and the withered grass
And through the twilight now the late
Few travelers in the westward pass*

*And Baghdad darken and the bridge
Across the silent river gone
And through Arabia the edge
Of evening widen and steal on*

*And deepen on Palmyra's street
The wheel rut in the ruined stone
And Lebanon fade out and Crete
High through the clouds and overblown*

*And over Sicily the air
Still flashing with the landward gulls
And loom and slowly disappear
The sails above the shadowy hulls*

*And Spain go under and the shore
Of Africa the gilded sand
And evening vanish and no more
The low pale light across that land*

*Nor now the long light on the sea:
And here face downward in the sun
To feel how swift how secretly
The shadow of the night comes on . . .*

A reading of this poem aloud by the students will give them a sense of its mesmeric euphony. They should be asked to comment on the almost total absence of punctuation and on the syntactical liberties the poet takes to suggest the onset of dusk and night as the earth turns on its axis, and how this synchronizes with the

poem's title; on the significance of the once great cities of the Middle East being swallowed up by history and the night; and on whether they feel that the last stanza hints at the USA too, despite its economic and military supremacy, being equally vulnerable.

To conclude, "If I read a book," Emily Dickinson observed, "[and] I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry" (Dickinson, 1976, p. xxiv). If we can succeed in alerting our students to the wizardry that words in unusual combinations can exercise so as to create new ways of looking at the world and at ourselves, we will have brought them to the portals of Keats' "magic casements, opening on the foam / Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn" (Keats, 1981, p. 324).

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