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Teaching Without Lecturing: Situating Poetry in The Classroom

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Abstract

Apart from exploring relations that bind Poetry and Teaching in common pursuit, this essay stops by certain unexamined premises and uncontested bromides. One such is the notion that poetry is better understood when a teacher lectures on its peculiar strengths, on a poet's meanings, and how they can be derived by detailed explication. This essay proposes that poetry is what poetry does in a classroom. Young readers prefer less prescriptive ways of reading poems. While the poet's language is a challenge they must meet on their terms, they feel free to learn their lessons in Language directly from the poems. Teachers will do well therefore to avoid lecturing to young learners who would rather listen to the poems. This essay is structured rather loosely although a subheading for each note anchors the main idea that drives its thoughts. Repetition and overlap of themes in some passages are not accidental. They occur when some forethought leads an idea on to an afterthought, and sometimes mnemonically directs it backward.

Keywords: *Poetry, Teaching, Classroom interpretation, Non-prescriptive reading, Student-centered learning*

Introduction

Teaching, Poetry: both are widely misunderstood. The uneducated public just as widely as those who think they know a great deal about education beg the question about teaching poetry. No wonder then that poet-teachers, and teachers of poetry, find themselves challenged by those who are cynical about poetry and pedagogy. That said, any news of the obsolescence of either, like Mark Twain's death during his lifetime, is greatly exaggerated. In the general haziness of humanities as a concept, there is need however to worry about the uses of poetry. I think of a classroom as the most ideal venue for discussing them. In such discussions, I hope to see young readers involve much more than they do now as collaborators with their teachers in broadening the *humanities* horizon. What is poetry good for in this mission? One answer for

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now would be: Poetry helps in sustaining reading relations that enhance, deepen, and enlarge the *human* vision of the world and human lives in it.

The immediate questions I address in what follows are these: Why are the young readers rather cautious, even sceptical, about poetry? How troubled they seem when they begin to see poetry as Language so different from the languages they know? What it takes to disabuse them of certain shibboleths and calcified notions about Language in general also belongs, quite happily, to the province of poetry. Poetry and Teaching have always been involved in a time-honoured mission of bringing young people closer to an art they fear to approach, an art almost like the bugbear children try to keep themselves away from. It has not been easy for the poets to accomplish this mission any more than it is for its most ardent and shrewd teachers. What builds a human *community*, what makes for a communion of sensitive souls, has always remained central to the poet's vocation. This again has been a worry for those who live in and out of classrooms. We shall see why this is so.

Think now of either Poetry or Teaching as a window. Open the window. No one will see only the window unmindful of what view it affords, what one sees beyond the window. Likewise, either Poetry or Teaching is a frame for the other to afford better view. Let us assume an open window in teaching so that what we see from here, others can see us from there as well. Georges Hugnet, the French graphic artist used to say: "The window was to the bird what the wing is to the day."[2] This is the poet's metaphor for freedom, a wing only the bird can see in the window that opens to the day. An affordance must be open like a window.

When teaching is construed as *tuition*, or as *coaching*, what is overlooked is the fact that all human beings, regardless of their matured age, can and do think. Recall the Zen aphorism: *the Buddha's Truth is Buddha's. It cannot be yours*. Ernesto Che Guevara used to tell his followers: *I am not a liberator. Liberators do not exist. The people liberate themselves.*[3] Let us put learning where Che most aptly put liberation. They are the same. The Liberal Arts so called will now begin to make sense. The teacher who invests in heuristics does not quite instruct, but allows their pupils to learn on their own, even allowing them to err, go astray, lose their way on an errand, so they can return to their own good sense, exercise discretion, and discover things on their own. Teach them a poem like Robert Frost's "Directive" that tells them that no one ever learnt anything before they were completely lost— lost to the self and the world, unmindful of the short-term goals and rewards, of immediate solution to something like a complicated algebraic equation. In refined heuristics, the learners err but they waste no time in grieving. They take heart from their errancy to see for themselves how they have learnt what little they have.

Further thoughts on this interrelationship (*error, errancy*, and *errand*) will confirm the sagacity of a Joseph Jacotot, the eponymous figure in Jacques Ranciére's *Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. Ranciére endorses wholeheartedly the "ignorance" of this Schoolmaster in exile who comes to realize that he is none the worse for not knowing the languages spoken in his classroom; that lessons are not directly linked to a teacher's 'knowledge;' and more crucially, that no amount of explication will help learners. In other words, if one understands Ranciére's Schoolteacher, one would easily see the vacuity of the

[2] Quoted in Poet's Encyclopedia (1979), 287.
[3] Che Guevara stated this in Mexico in 1958. Wikiquote.

prodigious pedagogical myth that holds up our educational empires— that knowledge will dispel all ignorance.

If we spend a little time going back to the roots of our learning, rather search the English *words* for our learning like *tuition* and *pedagogy*, we find that they derive from such concepts applied to exercising control over children and slaves. *Tutelage* meant keeping someone under the eye / care of a guardian (< Latin *tūtēla* = watching, keeping, guardianship…). Under someone's constant vigil, custody and care, how does one learn? No wonder, the imperial regimes of the world immediately saw the point of tutelage and pedagogy in the prescribed syllabi, the texts they printed for the colonies. The arts they taught here were never "liberal," although it did not take long for the qualifier *liberal* for the Arts to stick. Nor were those who taught them "liberal" in word or deed. Teachers who draw upon textbooks, compile and edit them under "prescription," are underpaid naturally. In academic feudalism why should anyone be paid handsomely to teach a *textbook*? In such regimes they also keep colonial rulebooks besides attendance rosters of daily exit and entrance, presence and absence. The *physical* must be recorded but who will monitor the minds? Perhaps the poets will answer this.

No detailed look at the History of Poetry is necessary to see poetry as the most widely and perennially contested category among the learned. I sometimes wonder what will happen to this art if even the poets stop worrying *what* it is. I take that to be *one* reason for R. W. Emerson to remark that "Language is fossil poetry."[4] That understood, we shall only agree that *teaching poetry* invites misunderstanding. No one can *teach* Poetry. At least not by way of pedestrian lectures and discussions where matter and mind are at work only at one deterministic end. When one teaches a poem, one must concede that the teacher is only at their best a good reader, a facilitator, a reiterator, a medium. In our lives, we move mostly in between poems heard, recited, recalled, intoned, or resonated someway all the time.

In short, in good teaching, *Language* is the apparent subject of a poem. That is why a classroom lecture nearly kills the *spirit* of the poem when it is laboriously *taught*. The fact is that a poem quietly does most of its work for which the teacher's vanity claims credit. Despite all the teacher's explicatory bravado, their benchpressing rhetoric, for all the "final examinations," poetry survives. And the real poems are mercifully those that escaped a teacher's ministrations, especially their "comprehension" tests. That we all remain in poetry's debt, yet none of the teachers can claim it as theirs, is proof of its survival. We recall a poetic line, even whole stanzas and lyrical paragraphs, not because someone *taught* us poetry but because we have had their experience of a life time, whose meaning is still alive for us. How is that meaning alive? Far away and long ago, what had registered in a young reader was the *shape* of thought rather than the mere thought upon which they had heard their teacher's descant.

There is one other thing about poetry that resists a teacher's (or a critic's, for that matter) effort to make it 'understood.' No teacher ever *planned* a poetry lesson in advance, hoping that this detail or that special feature of a poet or a poem must be emphasized in a class. In other words, nothing can be anticipated or bet on what unfolds in reading a poem with students. Planning

[4] Let me quote the short passage here that appears in "The Poet" (1844) where Emerson's premise that leads to this maxim is splendid. "The poets made all the words, and therefore language is the archives of history, and, if we must say it, a sort of tomb of the muses. For, though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency, because for the moment it symbolized the world to the first speaker and to the hearer. The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry" (Emerson, 2009.)

a poetry lesson is as pointless as predicting tomorrow's weather. For, a poem is the language that speaks its mind to each reader, its way. It is probably one that a poet did not quite plan either, one whose wonder that they eventually realized in a composition without much *work* toward any determined result. And that wonder, for once, was what the poet had let the *poem* think, and speak on its terms. When that happens, there aren't too many words chasing too few ideas. That is the wonder Wallace Stevens once so aptly captured in the opening lines of his "Of Modern Poetry:"

> The poem of the mind in the act of finding
>
> What will suffice. It has not always had
>
> To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
>
> Was in the script. (Stevens, 1942.)

Few among us know enough to handle such poems in a classroom where some hundred thoughts feed the imagination. Fewer still know what to say when the poem has said it all. No nagging discomfort for a good reader, in other words, about *understanding* a poem.

1.Voice, Voicing, Reading ...

Poetry is misunderstood just as frequently as teaching, perhaps because we cannot be sure in *whose* voice we first hear it. Of course, the poet speaks, or their persona. In the 'What is Poetry?' chapters of handbooks, the "speaker" of a poem appears rather than the "voice." Even among poets, there seems to be no agreement on what constitutes the *poetic*, although the only consensus seems to be that poetry is not for us to read only from a page, but to read *aloud*—reading allowed! *Voice* again. Off the page, we apply a time-honoured test to see whether a poem's words are rhythmic. If they are, they cannot but be echoic, reverberatory, to a fault—they ring, resonate, resound. Were language itself *not* rhythmic, it couldn't have been learnt, spoken, listened to, heard, seen, felt, or remembered and the human beings would not be the sentient creatures they are. Any rhythmic and memorable utterance that strikes an immediate chord in human ears is poetry: a thunderous applause, celebratory cheers by a group, shouts and scolds, slogans and hawkers' cries, labourers' *ho-ye-ho* grunts and howls, stichomythic vituperation, the auctioneer's iteration, public announcements and choric songs, all calls to prayer like *Azaan*, the Vedic or Gregorian chants, *Satsang bhajan*s …, virtually every action and reaction involving speech/ voice/ sounding possible in human language, *language imagining itself in doing what it wants to do*, is poetry. No wonder, G. M. Hopkins's one line that captures all this, "The roll, the rise, the carol, the creation" appears in his poem called "To R. B." Hopkins anticipates the fears most of his descendants would naturally feel in this world of insanely clamorous electronic bytes— that in his "lagging lines" (Hopkins, 1889) readers might miss the gradually evolving stages of lyric fulfilment.

Poetry, then, is language in action. Only in *sounding* Language does a person realize what their one language is capable of, to what impressive length it has stretched with their small effort. Besides, only one voice will call forth another, its answering voice.[5] Charles Bernstein, the

[5] "Tabla player Zakir Hussain tells us that his father taught him to speak using drum rhythms when he was a baby. In tabla, each finger is assigned a syllable, and playing the tabla is akin to speaking in phrases. In all languages there is a definite rhythmic aspect to spoken language, brought about by alterations in stress, duration, and pitch of the syllables. This was resoundingly

LANGUAGE poet, has often remarked that the distinctive tones and textures of the language are nowhere heard more clearly than in poetry. Practice lessons in English could begin with the most compulsive punster poets of the English Renaissance/ Jacobean period and must go on at least until the readers hear Hopkins and his progeny. On Poetry's performance, Bernstein has the following to say:

> Poetry performance brings into concrete realization the dimension of language itself: the "languageness" of language, the "wordness" of language. The acoustic quality of language, that which exists only in and as language. It's a dimension in which the language, the sound, and the particular words in the particular order are *not* dispensable. This indispensable quality is a fundamental value for a culture that tends to treat such features as insignificant. ... Poetry puts us back in touch with the ways in which meaning is generated and the musicality ... of this medium. It considers language as having primary value within the constrained context of the poem, of the poetry reading. (Bernstein, 1998.)

I am not impervious to a host of problems in teaching large English classes in most Indian colleges, the poor attention and stony silence among the majority of students, their disinclination to read anything at all outside class-hours, their average-to-extremely-below-par competence in English, especially in processing verse paragraphs.... In short, there is just not enough time to summon a group-readiness for *live* reading and discussion of poetry in a classroom. Ideally, an undergraduate classroom should be the proper ground where Stanley Fish's "interpretive community" should first form but we should be grateful indeed if at least it makes for a lively *reading* community. But that should not deter teachers from making at least an occasional effort to hear their students read the poems, at least some key lyric passages, loudly.

I think it would be unfair not to quote a memorable passage from Hugh Kenner at this point. Very rarely did that distinguished critic of English modernism disclose the strength of his legendary gift as a teacher but when he did as in the following passage, he gave all the credit to poets' voices that made his success in the classrooms phenomenal:

> Whatever I'm teaching, 'The Sunne Rising' or 'Canto XX' or *Ulysses*, I do much reading aloud. Whether it is exemplary reading or not Sir Laurence Olivier might well dispute, but it does have two advantages. It slows down the pace which the students encounter the words. And it nudges them, continually, from eye to ear. Maybe, even, they parody me in their dorms. If so, they're beginning to vocalize" (Kenner, 1988, 6 – 7).

In the beginning, as in the end, is the *voice*. A teacher knows that *that* is the poem's mainstay.

2.Reading Classrooms Reading

Children in English schools are in safe hands when their teacher lets them by turns *read* the poems to their peers. Very rarely do we come by such efforts in higher classrooms where teachers find it more expedient to play "records" for them. Proxy reading gets listeners nowhere. And then teachers suddenly realize that their colleagues are too eager to lock themselves into a counterproductive antagonism — *Literature* and *Language* are rival camps (or compartments?) under most "English department" roofs. As long as this despicable binary

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brought home to me firsthand when Zakir accompanied me on the congas during a speech on rhythm and language." Nina Kraus, "The Extraordinary Ways Rhythm Shapes Our Lives." https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/the-extraordinary-ways-rhythm-shapes-our-lives/ Downloaded 26 August 2025.

persists in India, teachers forfeit their credentials for teaching poetry. That is a subject for another forum, another time.

The advantages a classroom affords teachers and students are a culture all its own in its unique multiplicity. The only condition here is that a teacher must desist from *lecturing*. In a class, no one is ever their atomic selves when they read. The "classroom dynamics" make for collective listening and mutual sharing of things known and unknown. As always, we learn as well as *un*learn from others. This happens almost unawares. What we all love in a poem is appreciated at once among us all, just as what we do not like is shared across a group. This becomes evident when some bolder voice within a community starts a conversation, or asks a simple question others would have asked anyway. The collective naiveté is nothing to be ashamed of but the teacher is quite nudged by queries of the classroom, curious interventions, easing everyone's reading of difficult passages.

Listening to poetry again works wonders in a classroom. We all learn better by listening— recognition that when we *speak* we hear differently, and when others speak we hear a little (more) of ourselves in their voices. Some poets are known to fashion a peculiar pedagogics based on this recognition. One good example is "The Secret" by Denise Levertov. The poets know that there are readers and readers. Among such reading-listeners, poets target those who have a knack for catching whispers, the overheard murmur in the undertones, the silence that animates the foot-prints on a page. Therefore the poets do not relay messages all at once. They hold back the gists and piths especially for readers who are keen listeners. Those poets again are the best teachers we have who do not give away all knowledge (all secrets of the world) and 'finish' lecturing a semester. The poems teach slowly by letting readers pay attention, respond in stages, listen keenly to sounds and words. Often the poet's voice is not single— one voice is theirs, the other emanates from their readers' imagination. This is sometimes evident in pretty much the patience and courtesy we show the hearing-impaired people, or the slow respondents among us. *Say it again*, we tell — not our interlocutors but ourselves in a classroom. In so told, we begin to notice the poet's silences where there are no words. Of course each listener is at liberty to fill in the gaps of inaudibility in their own ways, but the point is that each word so filled in is well thought out. In all this, we know that not only reason but *imagination* thinks. This applies to all writing, but in poetry imagination is both the word heard and that unheard.

What we haven't *quite* heard once is sometimes a resonance to which somebody else is sure to bring attention. If that also urges us to think what it means to be deaf-aware in our social life, that is bonus. We shall then dispel our notions of 'difficulty' we anticipate in reading poets. Poets are not difficult at all. At best, they tease you, inveigle you into deep thinking and reflection, tantalize you, prompt you to follow their trails … and then leave you free. They let you see *how* language imagines what it is. Only that readers must persuade themselves to see/ hear the poet's language this way.

If teachers are still unable to see a poem as open, they ought to think how open *their* minds are to the world around them. No one can teach a closed mind; no closed mind can ever sense the inherently open poem. Perhaps we are sometimes wrong to imagine that a poet has something to tell us. Who knows— the poet is talking to himself or herself. As we all do. Talking to oneself is so common. That 'grammar' then is different: the fragments of that talk

have their peculiar syntax, completeness, order, and enough rigour to make sense for the duration of that talk. Poets know that this is quite licensed in printing and publishing.

3.Open and Closed Poems

We live in a society that does not value poetry as useful or usable, or see it to be a monetarily rewarding form of public discourse. The attitude generally in our busy lives is: What has *poetry* got to do with it? — that *it* might be a serious personal or public matter from the work-a-day world seemingly so prosaic. Poetry, for many people including the teachers, does not pay the service it requires. Of course they forget that much of what they do with language in this prosaic world is figurative to a fault. Not only the poems, but people lie. Poems only show how no *language* lies but its speakers do. The literal, as we think, is not always distinct from the figurative in the world we live. One way of putting an idea *versus* another always involves a figurative word or phrase. Be that as it may, we discreetly avoid fine rhetorical effects when we are desperate to hit the nail on its head.

How then does a poem teach us? This is very hard to say in precise terms. A simpler way of trying to figure this out however is to think how living in the languages we know enables us to live in this world the way we do. Of course we never seem to really know *how* we have learnt the language(s) we speak in the first place. Our early lessons in language are a blur. But poetry has always been with us ever since we heard the first sounds of our language(s). Ludwig Wittgenstein's apophthegm "The limits of my language are the limits of my world" in *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, # 5. 6 applies to both language and poetry (Wittgenstein, 1922, 1988). Those who study language and the poets who enrich the languages they write in are apt to read this Wittgenstein sentence in two ways:

> 1.As a human being/ poet, I live within the confines of my language. My language defines (sets the limits of) what I can say in it, my emotional reach, my expressive range.
>
> 2.As a human being/ poet, I enjoy being in a world of no limits with my language. My language being *my* world, I revel in the infinity of the world I conceive.

The second reading chimes with the Whitmanian largeness, while the first reflects the rueful poet's apology for being. Do not children lallate and singsong before they speak an intelligible sentence? Do they not try to put their first words *in other words*? Do they not follow a grammar of their own? In all this, they begin as poets. They are learners and teachers rolled into one tiny self before they pack their school bags and leave for schools. Perhaps their self-fashioned rhymes, parodic prayers and tongue-twisters, their sing-song reasoning, and their modulated fusions of awkward speech patterns better explain the precedence of poetry over the prosaic pedagogy of language that the schools deploy for them.

In a broader curriculum in any culture, Poetry is a key subject. Especially in teaching language, poets play a big role. Witness the school textbooks, nursery-rhyme playlists, anthologies, compendia of proverbial wisdom, formulaic tips, mnemonic verses, *subhāṣita ratna kōṣa*, etc. Nearly all these collections are basic teaching aids in language classes. They hold hands and save young minds from failures, ethical and linguistic. Most of all, they focus their attention particularly on a

learner's blind spot. Now poetry teaches not only that all of us have our blind spots, but that sometimes we occupy a spot often within that very blindness we seek to demystify.[6]

Since linguistic embarrassments are endemic to language learning, the poems extend palliative ethical care to bruised adult egos and soften punitive blows. Let us remember how unaffected and clueless the kids are when someone tells them that they err in using a language. Poems also tell children that their language is good to play with, especially the ordinary language of the working classes and economically poor sections. Iona Margaret Opie and Peter Mason Opie's research in the folkloric education of English children is even today a classic.[7] Like the sports and games that help the body grow stronger and serviceable in tough terrains, poetry teaches the young how a strong language helps the mind cope with a tough discursive world. Poetry is the best way for children to learn that everything ordinary is extraordinary in language when a poet shows them how. In other words, in *their* words, in a poet's words, how they speak the same language of the same world. And what difference it makes.

4.Recognition

Yet another lesson: there is nothing absolutely "new" that one brings to, or comes to know in, this world. One only confronts a world as the world one has already known to be such, at some point. No surprises. No shocks. (Unless one has deluded oneself.) But the poems one reads create that sense of a new knowledge: *recognition*.

You already know, but you have not quite *recognized* that as knowledge, or have known the world for the first time as now. All learning, most of all the learning of languages begins like this, the *recognition* that senses quicken in a poet like Walt Whitman:

> BEGINNING my studies, the first step pleas'd me so much,
>
> The mere fact, consciousness—these forms—the power of motion,
>
> The least insect or animal—the senses—eyesight;
>
> The first step, I say, aw'd me and pleas'd me so much,
>
> I have never gone, and never wish'd to go, any farther,
>
> But stop and loiter all my life, to sing it in extatic songs. (Whitman, 1865.)

Sometimes one feels being touched by a good fairy's wand on one's shoulder. Poetry gives us then that assurance that we could make progress in what we are doing *if our self is on its own.* Entirely on its own, when we trust our senses. We could go it alone.

In one special sense, I find in poetry some precious rarefied language that comes to my rescue, takes me by sheer surprise, in moments that I fear I have no ordinary language at all. Metaphors are born like this. They speak the unspoken in the most striking and redeeming ways. This is great recognition nonetheless. Poetry has a knack for surfacing facts, once learnt, you'd prefer to forget but you dare not.

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[6] In ocular anatomy, a "blind spot" is the point of entry of the optic nerve on the retina. And this point is insensitive to light. When we speak of someone's blind spot, we mean that that person has a locus where their view is obstructed. That is to say, that person's perception is flawed. Their lack of impartiality or fairness is explained by their blind spot.

[7] Scholars in pedagogy and teachers' training are familiar with their work, notably, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959).

Sometimes a poem forces us, like a good teacher, to concede a point that we are loath to honour as such. Human folly cannot be given another name. For example, our losses: material objects we own and value; people or places we love so much; even some of our besotted theories and beliefs …. The point is that losing any such thing is hard to get over. The things lost linger long and trouble our normal selves. When Elizabeth Bishop tells us that losing is an "art," *that* we are rather unwilling to see how. At first. When, however, she tells us that "The art of losing *isn't hard to master* (Bishop,1979; my emphasis), we begin to suspect that she is pulling our leg, and begin to wonder whether losing anything or anyone is a willed or conscious act, or an *art* that improves with human practice and pertinacity. As we wonder like this, the poem teaches us that losing, coming to terms with loss, is imbued with such curious suggestions as well. The hardest thing is not the loss or losing but being able to live on as the possessive self that one has been all along, comforted now by the notion that no loss will be that inconsolable. Losing is no big deal unless it is seen as *art*, and it rankles that we are made to see it as such. But the poem says that losing, the art, is not hard to master. But to get there, students need to practise tones, modulations of tone in reading the poem, nearly its every line in order to see the meaning emanating from one's tone. What self we lose and what we win atonally instead is a crucial recognition.

The time and place for recognition are also mostly thresholds. At thresholds, both mental and material, most human beings pause once, ponder for a while. In those moments we recognize the thin line between the conscious and unconscious, and in most cultures rituals mark those crossings. Can we ever recall a ritual we perform without a song? Ceremonial and commemorative moments are enlivened by the muttered chants preparatory to absolute enchantment. Songs lodge us in the vicinity of birth, initiation, meeting and parting of longing and pain, even tragic losses. Mutability is a lesson poets teach by situating us suddenly at literal and symbolic thresholds. Eliot's *Four Quartets* alone will give us many such junctures where a self is set to cross thresholds, returning later to find each place new, all in fresh light. The poet's point is that what has changed is the one who has gone ahead, one who now goes back to the same place only to know it again, *recognize* it. And that self now knows its self all the better for the *experience*. Hence that classic line in "The Dry Salvages:" "but the sudden illumination— / We had the experience but missed the meaning" (Eliot, 1963, 208).

5.The free poets, their freedom

Let us for a moment recall the Georges Hugnet metaphor of the window for the bird. Until poets find the right metaphors for their topics, they struggle. Nothing goes by luck. Insofar as they are not speaking but making their *words* do the talking, they ought to be mindful of those words liable to be read *into*, foul meanings attributed to, them by regimes that abhor poets. In this, the regimes only echo Plato's fear that poets will someday replace philosophers. When poets summon truth, the governors feel insecure. "When I thought of 'the government of the tongue' as a general title for [the 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures], what I had in mind," explains Seamus Heaney, "was [the] aspect of poetry as its own vindicating force. In this dispensation, the tongue (representing both a poet's personal gift of utterance and the common resources of language itself) has been given the right to govern" (Heaney, 1988, 92).

So poets speak up. As governors and the governed, they are unafraid to begin conversations about themselves, other people, and the world they share with others like them. Rather, their *poetry* speaks. Just to us. In whispers. In the privacy of what we understand as conscience. That is the only language we hear. Poetry speaks especially in matters where most others in society feel rather reluctant, hesitant; or worse, feel disengaged until it personally hurts them. But poems speak up/ out, regardless of who listens, who wouldn't. Poets, like all artists, know the risk this entails. Like all writers, only they know how society that trades in stocks and shares views them.

Why poets keep circling around this idea of freedom must now be clear to young readers. It is easy for political parties and the governments they manage to put in place, in fact *anyone in power*, to mislead the public about freedom. Anyone who claims that they *grant* us permission, *give* us freedom (among them parents to children they bring up; teachers to their wards; one spouse to the other; mentors to the mentees; masters to servants; the police to those in custody; lenders to borrowers; seniors to juniors; colonizers to the colonized …) should rethink the idea and the act. "Freedom is not privilege. It is a right," David Hare asserts, and remarks further that "it is necessary to remind governments that their job is not to grant freedoms, but to protect and administer them on behalf of the people to whom they properly belong" (Hare, 1990, 42). The point is that the people who enjoy good governance *feel* the freedom rather than having to be reminded that they have it. The finest poetry, that which the young readers enjoy, makes them feel obligation-free.

Sometimes all it takes is to cut through all the ingratiating nonsense we serve others and tell them the truth. Tell the public even about the poets and poetry that dare not speak the truth.[8] But why? That truth is, simply, that no poet *feels* that they are free. Recall how Auden implores the dead poet to "*Teach* the free man how to praise" (Auden, 1939, 239; my emphasis).That makes Auden's Yeats one great exception and example. The poet's freedom must be *earned* to be felt. That recognition culminates in the creation of poetry. That is what the poets teach us. No lecture will persuade young readers but their own conversations with the poet might let them see *how* free that freedom is.

Tell the readers, for example, like Muriel Rukeyser who knows that it is much easier to be deceived by the democratic ideals and freedom of speech than tell the truth about it:

> In our period, they say there is free speech.
>
> They say there is no penalty for poets,
>
> There is no penalty for writing poems.
>
> They say this. This is the penalty. (Rukeyser, 1968, 33.)

The question, open to all of us is therefore: why we cannot distinguish between truth and its semblances; why do we feel inclined to speak untruth when we know that we are still unfree? The first freedom for the poets therefore is to free themselves from the illusions that make it impossible for them to be even disillusioned. That is essentially a good lesson for students as well.

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[8] On the imaginative acts and truth, Toni Morrison's view still remains indisputable. The opposition between fiction and fact is sometimes extended needlessly if tendentiously to blur the distinction between fact and truth. Morrison is as cogent as she is clear when we hear her say that "the crucial distinction [for her is] the distinction between fact and truth. Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot" (Morrison, 1995, 93).

Poetry teaches by liberating them. It sets them free from certain *illusions* of freedom and liberty (like classroom lectures) to which social and academic institutions inure them. When readers are so deschooled by poetry, they are at liberty to do what they want to do. Once truly liberated (*liber* which is the Latin for a free person), they learn all over again. Not for nothing has William Blake this among his famous *Proverbs of Hell*: "Damn, braces: Bless relaxes" (Blake 1789, 87).

6.Poetry as amusement

We are told of the Muses when we study poetry. Muses do not lecture, they do not holler, but they *amuse* you. Their *music* is not far away. They are the nine daughters of Mother Mnemosyne, memory. Readers recognize the *poetic* by a special gift of memory. What they do not, cannot, remember; and what is not recalled in pain or pleasure by anyone, is not poetry. Poetry is the only key that opens *generational* memory. A habit that grows with most of us is that we recall something in poetry we have first known as *ours*, or something we seem to have now forgotten as ours in it. Memory teaches readers to play it back and forth.

Emily Dickinson's poem # 89:

> Some things that fly there be —
>
> Birds— Hours — the Bumblebee —
>
> Of these no Elegy.
>
> Some things that stay there be —
>
> Grief— Hills —Eternity —
>
> Nor this behooveth me.
>
> There are that, resting, rise.
>
> Can I expound the skies?
>
> How still the Riddle lies! (Dickinson, ?1862)

That *still* is the key. The Riddle lies if we cannot tell *corpse* as its answer. We must remember that the body that lies still now has already risen to heaven in Puritanical faith. And if it has, we also remember, it joins the company of those (birds, flowers, bumblebee) that ask for no elegy. How the figures in this short poem ring such reminiscent bells.

Poetry amuses further by prompting questions about one's self: who you are, why you are here, how you think and feel about the world you live in, the people and other creatures you live with. In other words, poetry is all about the *world*, the realization that the poetry of the world is what you appreciate. There is something special about this knowledge. Of course one knows this— without knowing it; or knowing it quite. At least in two senses: *One knows the world without ever being overly conscious of one's knowledge. One hardly knows when and how one has known such and such, but one does know that one has. Someday, somewhere. Furthermore, one also realizes that somehow one has always known this, all along, without realizing it.* That realization again returns all readers to the question of Poetry, Teaching, and all the lessons that they learn without a formal syllabus. In a College of the Muses, they know only what it is to be so amused.

7.The Poet as Teacher, the Teacher as Poet

Very few poets dare being the earnest teachers they really are for fear of being labelled didactic or presumptive. The Modernist lyric since Eliot, Pound, Marianne Moore and others has modelled itself on their early personae. In such lyrics, we often see someone who is reluctantly an authentic self, one who is indistinguishable from their maker nonetheless, a ventriloquist dummy like Prufrock or Crazy Jane. In such poetry, the poet always acted as an impersonal catalyst, someone who would rather not be arraigned for their politically dubious gestures and poses.

That explains the relatively few poems in English where we hear the Poet *as* Teacher/ the Teacher *as* Poet. The first celebrated modern poet–teacher of sorts was W. B. Yeats in "Among School Children" but who could tell whether he was always there or fancied being elsewhere at the drop of a hat? There is one poem however where I find a classic combination of a poet-teacher's precept and practice: Gary Snyder's "Axe Handles." Here the aims and ends meet in perfect alignment with one another when Snyder lets us see teaching as a cycle involving the gifts of poetic tradition appreciated instantaneously by the poet's talent.

In the opening scene of "Axe Handles" we meet the poet's son Kai who watches "how to throw a hatchet / One-half turn and [how] it sticks in a stump" (Snyder, 1983, 266). Kai now wants a hatchet for himself, shops for it and brings one home. His poet-father then shows him how something already at hand will very well do for now: "A broken-off axe handle behind the door" (Snyder, 1983, 266). That, he shows, is a perfect fit for the boy's new hatchet. This demonstration of the handle being hewn to appropriate size for the hatchet head, the loving care with which a neat job is done with the material at hand, etc. now makes for a brief reflection:

> "When making an axe handle the pattern is not far off."
>
> And I say this to Kai
>
> "Look: We'll shape the handle
>
> By checking the handle
>
> Of the axe we cut with—"
>
> And he sees. (Snyder,1983, 266.)

There is indeed more other teachers might add to the "lessons" here if they recall the Pound tradition, but there occurs to me that the poet of "Axe Handles" had at the back of his mind a quote attributed to R. W. Emerson: "The years teach us much the days never knew." If the poet was not born in a day, a poem is the work of days and years, a growth which readers record in time. The poet's teaching is always a record of their years' work.[9]

8.The Renaissance of Wonder

Theodore Watts-Dunton's definition of romanticism as "the renaissance of wonder" (qtd. in Hudson, 1913, 203) beats all other attempts to tell us what *poetry* is. We have heard it said that

[9] I have written a fairly detailed commentary on this poem in *The CEA Critic* (2024). My point is that for students, help is always at hand when memory nudges them toward an old experience they have had with some teacher. The poem is a fine example of andragogy.

distance can reveal a thing or two about love that intimacy cannot. Poetry marks that distance from the world. From afar, the poet enchants, teaches. If we know the poetry, we need not even see the poet. We only need to wonder what glasses the poet gives us to see the world with; whether we are quite satisfied with the lenses this patient oculist tries out on our eyes, one after another, until we say: *here, at last, this is perfect. Thank you!* Good poems are such reading tests. (If any of this *sounds* metaphorical, then we have been on the right track so far. Poetry is masked Philosophy. Unmasked, it makes sense for those who believe that the world is after all lovely at every waking.)

Is this 'knowledge' what we take to be the poetry in the world, the world in poetry? So we return to wonder. How we regret sometimes that we have almost lost our capacity for wondering in this world of wonders. Poetry makes us wonder about that too, this loss, while teaching us how best to still wonder when all other resources fail us. "It is an essential element in wonder that we recognise what we see as something we did not make," Mary Midgley once remarked, "[what we] cannot fully understand, and acknowledge as containing something greater than ourselves" (Midgley, 1989, 140.)

What is more, great poets *allow* their readers/ listeners some time to just discover wonder for what it is, all on their own. (Poets don't contrive. At least they do not let us see their strain too much.) The real wonder is when *we* wonder— hardly realizing, sensing, that we have been only wondering. As if in a passing thought, T. S. Eliot writes in his famous episode of "a familiar compound ghost" in "Little Gidding:" "I said [to the stranger] 'The wonder that I feel is easy, / Yet ease is cause of wonder" (Eliot, 1963, 317). *Touché!* How incrementally does that "ease" turn into uncanny unease in that episode.

Freedom from fear is wonder of another kind. Among the many things poetry *un*teaches is the irrational fear many young readers develop for anything remotely called the "poetic." Somehow they have come to believe that the language of poetry is special and specialized. They believe (wrongly of course) that all poets are serious always, thinking and speaking abstruse philosophy so much so that their language is impenetrable and far too complex for young people. It takes long for them to realize that the best poets in any language are mostly not quite different from young people who love fun, prefer simple and uncomplicated things; that they love *play* as opposed to work. Another thing young adults easily forget in their impatience to grow up is that they were once children and they *explored* language while learning it. Children have grown up unawares but in that 'growth' their languages (their own besides those constituting their circumambience) have played a major part. They have guiltlessly played with Language as the languages have played with them. Their 'play' has included wonder-games— word-spinning bravado, rhymes, alliterative and assonantal tongue-twisters, fun with pun and mnemonic verses, spoonerisms and riddles, even singsong lyric nonsense. Or when they fool their peers with such topsy-turvy lingo as "I met a bark and he dogged at me." Their occasional linguistic embarrassments have seldom come in their way of chattering, persuading, arguing, hectoring, scolding, remonstrating, protesting, sloganeering or mimicking their elders. If language has done all these for them and they have felt so comfortable with them through their growing-up years, poetry now will only show them how other games might be fancied, even played to great effect, in the same language. In short, they will learn that *fear* has no place in mastering rhetoric let alone reading poetry. Or wonder whose *ease*, as Eliot remarks, is the cause of wonder.

9.Understanding Poetry

Teachers of my generation grew up consulting an old textbook called *Understanding Poetry* written, its poems compiled and edited, by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren first published in 1938. For long, before the worldwide web resources, this was practically our "poem finder" in our poorly-funded libraries. Never before in the history of English teaching was such a textbook made handy; it enjoyed incomparable world-wide circulation what with its scores of reprinted and enlarged editions. Nearly every failure related to English pedagogy was laid at its door when the New Criticism this textbook had putatively spawned and sponsored began to be discredited in the wake of Theory. Everything it seemed had to be redefined and re-read: the "texts," readers and reading, meaning and interpretation, and not to speak of literary forms and genres of writing. But one serious charge the Poststructuralists found with Brooks and Warren which their followers in the academy could no way convincingly refute was the parochial Anglocentric understanding of the poetry Brooks and Warren sampled. It looked as though such textbooks had urged the closing of their young readers' minds.

Let us for the sake of clarity consider how readers close their minds when they are encouraged to *closely* read the texts. Are there "closed" or "open" texts? The formal attributes of the printed poem (the leading and point-size of letters, lineation, spacing, margins, line-breaks, punctuation ...) always wrongly represent speech as it happens in our lives. We speak languages without the constraints of print or paper. Where does the poem look *closed*? At the writer's desk, or on the printed page? In reality, a poem as read is always open, open *in* the world, open *to* the world— its vastness, inclusive range, and overwhelming expanse. Printed in textbooks, the poem *appears* closed. It is tone-deaf. The explication of a poem (such as we find in Brooks and Warren) often misled readers by forcing their attention to stay with certain words and linger around key phrases in a poem that would conduct them to a plausible reading. And that reading again is so close(d) that it virtually forbids another look, a possible glance at other possibilities of engagement. And when poems invited other readings, the explicators discovered complexities and ambiguities in them that enriched further close reading, more analysis, but the readers hardly bothered to ask *whose* complexities and ambiguities they are. Certainly such readings could not help being clever if contrived, often tendentious.

One other thing. The Brooks-Warren school of explicators sometimes could not help giving readers the impression that they are do-gooders. In the act of building a well-meaning ramp for the intellectually-challenged undergraduates, they fed the lecturing fodder for classrooms. Comprehension seemed the easiest way to "understand" poetry. In that vain effort, some of them ventured to polish the jewel of a poem until it turned to dust. For those interested in the kinds of disservice *Understanding Poetry* had done to American classrooms, a somewhat synoptic account is available in Alan Golding's *From Outlaw to Classic* (1995,103, 108 -110).

In an "open text" on the contrary nothing is ever finished; its interpretive ambit is its mainstay. Multiple readings open up when different readers at different times bring something of theirs into the poem— at the very least, a *history* somewhat of their own life in reading. They begin to read then with a heightened awareness of *tones*. Open to the world, the poem invites the reader into its world. If a teacher is around, their action at best is catalytic in this process. Sometimes,

the best teacher reads their wards reading (making sense incrementally) in a participatory exercise where no coercive authority (neither the author's nor the instructor's) figures. Where they sense allowance, readers feel free to look at the poem as working wonders in reception. Nothing is imposed or served as injunction toward a culturally determined meaning or legitimately 'official' interpretation. Even when such reading illumines something, mercifully something still remains shaded in another open reading. Openly read, a poem is always work in progress. Differently read, the poems even begin to read their readers differently. So, those readers return to a poem, later again, because they recall something about it that prompts another reading; or they have indeed forgotten something about it, a detail too precious to be lost.

As opposed to the well-meaningly directed protocols of reading in Brooks and Warren, texts that remain open for readers allow them to see the poetic form *politically* as well. They are free, in other words, to reject the implicitly ordained authority of the poet. Thinking through poetic structures, readers know why this poet writes in strict metrical forms — why, for example, Bishop chooses the villanelle for her "One Art" and no other— while that other poet feels the unbuttoned air of loose verse forms in William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*. Poets are human beings like us who think and breathe thoughts; only that they know what breathing rhythm best suits their writing/ typing hand. They know what poetic form best catches the spirit in the letter or shapes the letter in the spirit. Of course poets live in the world as we do, but a poet is a more responsive (and responsible) *social* being than most of us, one who opens the poetic window up to a world we have not quite noticed or registered so far. Poems raise issues, even *legal* issues involving judicial fairness and public suffering, but they do not deliver verdicts. Open reading thus lets readers appreciate such things as well without ever having to footnote all the sources of our wayward thoughts.

When critics endlessly debate what Emily Dickinson makes a dash for, I sometimes think a partial answer will occur to them if they re-read her "I Felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (# 340, 1861). Of course this poet knows her *commasūtra*. The very first line uses a comma before she tells us where she felt a funeral. More than half way into her account of this feeling, she marks the transitions with as many as *ten* commas but the poem ends not with a whimper but — a dash. When her Reason is done knowing, she goes down into "hit[ting] a World, at every plunge." Open texts end this way, letting readers still speculate what World it was that she hit and what door opens when "a Plank in Reason" breaks.

It is T. S. Eliot who, I believe, is most misunderstood as a poet. And perhaps, too, for the wrong reasons. Many readers associate impenetrable obscurity and esoteric philosophy with his poetry and avoid reading some of his most lucid and absolutely splendid poems. Such lyric effusions may be few and hard to locate, but let me cite an example from his verse play, *Murder in the Cathedral*. This passage is spoken in the first person singular by a Chorus of women about knowledge: what it is, and how they know what they think they know (and how far away from the truth they might still be):

> Have I not known, not known
>
> What was coming to be? It was here, in the kitchen, in the passage,
>
> In the mews in the barn in the byre in the market-place
>
> In our veins our bowels the skulls as well
>
> As well as in the plottings of potentates

As well as in the consultations of powers .... (42)

This verse is useful for young readers of poetry to remember. The Chorus of women are poor and illiterate, but they speak of what they think is coming to ruin their lives and spell doom for their country and people. They do not utter the word for "What was coming to be," because they do not know. But the listeners will hardly think of anything worse than Death. That "It," which the poet only wants us to know, is not of the kind grasped with our super-speciality instruments of the intellect. Besides, much of our knowledge we sense as *human* is of this kind, regardless of our costly education. We know this, but we are hardly disposed to saying what we know in plain language. That in a way explains the use of the first person singular voice here.

If we listen carefully to the poets, they say pretty much the same thing as often as they can. They are still trying to tell us how much Language means to them. Not *a* language they write in, or a polyglottal medley they try out as Pound does in his *Cantos*. Just Language, the idea and act that make us human, and the *community* that so forms when people communicate in languages commonly shared by them. But, as Sigurd Burckhardt put it in an essay on the modern poet's language, "the poet is inordinately aware of any evidence that human condition— through language— is perhaps only an illusion; that language itself, once it is deprived of its external props, may be really a vast game of question begging in which we presuppose the community which we pretend to establish by speaking" (Burckhardt, 1960, 2). With so much at stake, it is silly if teachers supposed that classroom lectures will suffice when poets look in vain for communities that appreciate their effort. Institutional communities are curt and corporate. They have long ceased to forge communities that converse in a language people respect or love. "Language," as Burckhardt adds, "is the poet's be-all and end-all. ... Improbably he [sic] must try to get the better of it, to provide the constructs which, however indirectly and abstractly, show that language can be unequivocal. And while he sorrows, rejoices, prophesies, or celebrates love and beauty in full creative freedom, to this one task he is bound; whatever he is talking *about*, the very mode of his talking is a commentary on language and an attempt to overcome it" (Burckhardt, 1960, 3, emphasis in the original).

It is no small detail that the Chorus of unlettered women speak the language of their community. This is a very important lesson in understanding human language. It is not always a learned philosopher or a shrewd commentator who gets the meaning of a poem right but an ordinary mind that knows that in certain circumstances, language might mislead us about how we usually do things with words. And this realization is not small. We always salute a ghostly authorial presence in reading poetry. We respect it, and never question its warrant. All we know for sure is that we are not being *taught* a poem. Of course it cannot be that a "village explainer" Gertrude Stein often found in her friend Ezra Pound is in the vicinity. "[E]xcellent if you were a village, but if you were not, not" (Stein, 1933, 113.) A class is not a village. There is nothing to lecture when they hear the poets speak.[10]

[10] I made the first notes for this essay for an open lecture to students of the University of Hyderabad, India soon after I was appointed to the Institution of Eminence Chair in English Literary and Cultural Theory of the Humanities School. Anna Kurian and Pramod K. Nayar extended professional courtesies and facilities that made my work since 2022 easy and productive. I dedicate this essay to Anna and Pramod with much respect, love, and gratitude.

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