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Teachers have to decide what poems should be taught and how they should be presented. The teacher ought to choose poems which he himself likes and which he expects that his students will like. Once chosen, the poem needs to be taught as a "meaningful whole" with emphasis on its unique structure and shape and on the significance of the parts in relation to the whole. The poem should be studied as a poem, not as an element of biography or history. Finally, musical elements of the poem, heard as it is read aloud, add to the enjoyment of the poem and, in fact, may be an integral part of its meaning. (JS)

Opinion

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Approach to Poetry

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The title of my talk may seem rather pointless. For all of you, I suppose, have not only long since approached poetry: you have arrived at it, embraced it, or seized it by the throat—according to the kind of animal you have taken it to be.

Yet, as fresh poetry is constantly being written, and as our point of view with respect to older poetry is constantly changing with the passage of time and with change in ourselves, and as poetry syllabuses in the schools are occasionally modified, the spatial metaphor in "approach" may not be inappropriate.

I would ask, and try to answer, at least in part, two questions. What poetry should we present to senior pupils? And how should we present it? The first has largely been answered for me, in a prescriptive way, by the Board of Senior School Studies, but a good deal of choice is still possible. Within the permitted limits a teacher should choose those poems he himself likes, and which he expects the pupils will like. These may not be the same, and the second must be to some extent a speculative matter. But a teacher can experiment: if one poem proves unpalatable he can try another. He should not, however, give way too easily; he should make sure a poem he himself likes is properly tasted before permitting its rejection. I am assuming that the end of poetry—indeed of all literature—is pleasure; and no-one should read poetry from any other motive than the desire to be pleased. Enjoyment is more likely to be achieved if students (as the Commentary on the Syllabus urges) are "helped to grasp a poem as a meaningful whole" and are assured that "the really central questions and problems raised in a poem can have no absolutely 'right' answers." I stress "a meaningful whole." A poem has structure and shape; its parts have significance in relation to the whole. The whole is greater and other than the sum of the parts. Examined without its context, a part of a poem will evoke a different response, will lure the reader into concentration upon and a false interpretation of details the relation of which cannot be seen. If, for example, I draw on the blackboard a short curved line, and invite aesthetic response, I shall get none. If I press for a closer examination, pretending that there is beauty there, you may, under a magnifying glass, see beauty in the particles of chalk; but you would then be responding to nature, not to art. But if by adding a few more lines I complete a drawing of, say, a cat, you can then make an aesthetic response, and comment on the crudeness of my artistry. If you concentrate your attention upon a few square yards of one wall of Westminster Abbey, or even upon its main doorway, and do not see the other parts, or the building as a whole, you will miss the grace and proportion in which its total beauty consists, and will exaggerate the importance of details of whose relation to the whole you are not aware. You will probably examine the surface of the stone with a magnifying glass, noting details which would be unimportant or even invisible if you were viewing the building as a whole. Similarly, if you were asked to make an aesthetic response to a single stanza of Shelley's **Adonais** (there is a Penguin anthology which offers just such a selection), you would be likely, in inspecting such a tiny fragment of a meaningful whole, to remark on details of quite minor significance in relation to that whole.

There are of course practical difficulties in the way of presenting the whole of longer poems—**Paradise Lost**, for example, or even **The Rape of the Lock**. It would probably be best to leave these alone until such time as students can cope with them in their entirety.

The poem, then, the whole poem, and—most people would go on to say—nothing but the poem. Avoid the biographical approach, and the historical—either in the sense of trying to discover what a seventeenth-century poem (say) meant to contemporaries, or in the sense of "placing" a poem in the development of a literary form or a literary movement. Students should be encouraged (to quote the Syllabus Commentary again) to read "always with a close attention to what is being said in the individual poem." Information about Keats's life is not necessary for the understanding and appreciation of the 'Ode to Autumn'; we can appreciate 'Rabi ben Ezra' quite well without knowing anything at all about Robert Browning or the musician who is the subject of the poem. There may of course sometimes be allusions which need to be explained, but explanations should be only such as are essential for the comprehension of the poem.

Acknowledging what Bateson calls "the primacy of meaning" in one's appreciation of a poem, I go on to inquire into the part played by sound in the appeal of poetry.

In the musical quality of a poem (read aloud: and of course a poem is not fully 'created' until it is read aloud) there are many elements: absolute loudness, tempo, accentual pattern, rhyme, the selection and arrangement of words to produce the great range of onomatopoeic effects, vowel patterns, the grouping of liquid or plosive consonants, assonance and alliteration, duration of sound-groups and of pauses or intervals of silence, pitch and variation of pitch. The first two and the last depend chiefly on the reader, who will, however, adapt himself to the intentions of the poet. He may gallop shouting into 'The Destruction of Sennacherib,' or into the ride from Ghent to Aix; he will move slowly and solemnly as 'The curfew tolls the knell of parting day'; tiptoe and almost whisper through 'Let your song be delicate' or 'Love's Coming'. To the mechanics of accentual patterns, from the regular orthodoxy of the Augustans to the liberties of Whitman and Hopkins, the student should pay some attention, if only because reading aloud depends partly on some appreciation of accentual rhythm. Onomatopoeia, occurring in its crudest form in words which are simply vocal imitations of the sounds referred to, appears more extensively in

> The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves

and in

> moan of doves in immemorial elms
> And murmuring of innumerable bees.

More subtly, the rhythm of a line may suggest the movement described, though the movement may be soundless, as in this representation of the falling of snow:

> With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause, and renew,
> We watch them wandering up and down the wind's nonchalance.

Tennyson accomplishes the same sort of thing when he uses sound effects to describe the soundless movement of two kinds of boats:

> By the margin, willow-veil'd
> Slide the heavy barges trail'd
> By slow horses, and unhail'd
> The shallop flitteth silken-sail'd
> Skimming down to Camelot.

Several devices contribute to the effect here: most of the consonants in the first lines are voiced, those in the 'shallop' lines unvoiced; most of the vowels in the 'barge' lines are long, in the "shallop' lines short. And of course a reader, having regard to the sense, will take the barges at a slow tempo, the shallop more quickly.

The whole question of the musical element in poetry is of course hotly debated. At one extreme you have the critic who asserts that the writing of poetry consists in "the conscious and deliberate construction, upon a theme utterly indifferent, of a musical pattern of words which gives delight". The Imagist Manifesto (c. 1913) advised:

> Study "cadences', the finest that you can discover, preferably in a foreign language so that the meaning of the words may be less likely to divert your attention from the movement.

This advice implies, among other things, that a poem needn't be intelligible, in the intellectual sense—indeed, it's better if it isn't, for the 'meaning' will distract your attention and spoil your pleasure in the music. It also implies that meaning and music can be separated. At the other extreme, such a critic as F. W. Bateson ridicules what he calls the 'Pure Sound Theory' and asserts that there probably is "no such thing as verbal music" and that "in language generally sound as such has little or no influence on meaning". I think both sets of extremists are wrong. The important facts are first that part of the appeal of a poem is a musical one, and secondly that the musical appeal is related to the meaning, or is even an integral part of the meaning. For this reason it is quite absurd to isolate and praise, for example, alliteration, as being in itself musically pleasing. In a recent critical appreciation of a poem a first-year university student wrote that "a subtle use is made of internal alliteration," and quoted for illustration the line

Entrance and exit wounds are silvered clean

(I give his underlining: he might have gone further and marked the five 'n' sounds, for example.) The alliteration here is not particularly prominent, hardly any more extensive than it might be in any phrase of half a dozen words. It has, moreover, no particular relation to the meaning of the line. As I pointed out to the student, he might just as usefully have marked recurring sounds in his own immediately preceding phrase: no-one would want to claim that these patterns had any aesthetic significance whatever. I am not of course denying that alliteration does sometimes play a part in the aesthetic effect of a poem. Let us take a line such as this from Milton's 'Lycidas':

Smooth sliding Mincius, crown'd with vocal reeds.

The poetry-is-music champions will probably pounce at once on the alliteration, tabulating sibilant and liquid consonants. These do have a certain minor importance, to which we shall come in a moment, but with which we shall certainly not begin. A line in which 's' occurs four times is not necessarily, and certainly not by reason of that fact, a good line. Nor should we consider rhythm alone, apart from the sense. The line begins with a spondee: if you think such a metrical foot admirable in itself, then you must admire 'four times' and 'good line' in the sentences I've just uttered. Let us begin with meaning, relating the line to the whole poem (and remembering that poetry is ordinarily organized at two levels or even, like subjects in the Wyndham Scheme, at three). Milton is writing a pastoral elegy, in which he pretends that he, his lamented friend, and other personages who appear, are shepherds. He has just been musing upon the "homely slighted shepherd's trade", by which, according to the convention,

he means the high calling of a poet. He refers to those other "shepherds", the great pastoral poets of antiquity, Theocritus and Virgil. They are not directly named, but alluded to by the names of associated rivers—"Fountain Arethuse, the Sicilian and Theocritean stream; and Mincius, "honoured flood," the stream near Mantua, where Virgil was born. Shepherds played on reed pipes, and the pastoral poet pretended he was piping simple music of the same kind. Mincius, then, is first of all simply an Italian river in which reeds grow. Secondly, it is associated with—indeed, identified with—Virgil, the king of pastoral poetry, and therefore appropriately "crowned". Moreover, each river of antiquity had its god, and he too could be "crowned". The "vocal reeds" are at once the literal reeds rustling as the river and the wind agitate them, and the pastoral pipe, and the poetry of Virgil. The literal river and the song of Virgil are both "smooth sliding": the initial alliteration, the even accentuation, and the long vowels, suggest—in this context and in these words—the steady, constant lapse of water. In the same way, the staccato rhythm and necessarily short plosive "k" sounds in the second part of the line suggest the rustling of the reeds. If we care to use the substitution trick and write instead

Smooth sliding Mince, he us crowned with vocal reeds

we have a sound pattern that is virtually the same, and if musical appeal were poetry's only appeal this line should be as pleasing as Milton's. But of course it isn't, if we pay the slightest attention to meaning. Mince is presumably a person; that he should be smooth sliding, or crown anyone with reeds, is simply ludicrous. This substitution, however, does not prove, and is not meant to prove, that musical effects are not important in poetry. They are; but in conjunction with meaning, or, more exactly, as a part of meaning.