



Chapter 4 Teaching Poetry

Teaching poetry offers the literature instructor some of the most fundamental, immediate, active, even physical ways to engage students in learning. Ironically, not very long ago everyone assumed that teaching poetry was at the center of teaching the mysteries of literature, a sacred rite of the New Criticism, conducted in an atmosphere of intense and manly collegial consensus. Frank Ellis remembers teaching Freshman English at Yale in the years after World War II. “The textbook was Brooks and Warren’s *Understanding Poetry* (1938). There were a dozen sections, of which Cleanth Brooks himself was the boss. Many of the students were veterans. The instructors met with Cleanth once a week to hammer out the school solution to the poems of next week.”¹ The military camaraderie and hard-edged critical unanimity of the New Critical method combined masculine physicality with scientific engineering to redeem poetry from any lingering whiff of sentimental femininity, not that Brooks and his men were teaching any of the three-named lady poets Hemingway had mocked. Understanding poetry was taught as a man’s job, a triumph of reason over emotion.

But these days poetry has been dislodged from the center of the literary curriculum by fiction, drama, cultural studies, and even literary theory. Teachers lament that students find it difficult and intimidating. According to Anne Lake Prescott, in the US “even good students can arrive at college afraid of it, some because they think it a mystery into which they are not initiated and some because they take poems to be cryptic messages with nuggets of advice or belief – like a fortune cookie.”² In the UK, writes Stephen Regan, debates over English and the national curriculum have ignored poetry as a distinct genre, so that “while the poetry festivals flourish, some undergraduate students are likely to arrive at university with

little or no interest in poetry, confessing that they don't know how to read it and therefore can't be expected to understand or appreciate it."³ Ann Thompson too remarks that "many students don't like poetry very much, and they particularly resist poetry that is difficult."

Yet many people commented on the spontaneous resurgence of poetry after September 11, 2001. United States poet laureate Billy Collins said, "In times of crisis, it's interesting that people don't turn to the novel . . . It's always poetry." In the *New York Times*, Dinitia Smith described the way "improvised memorials often conceived around poetry" sprung up around the city, and "poems flew through cyberspace across the country in e-mails from friend to friend" – Shelley's "Ozymandias," Auden's "September 1, 1939," Yeats's rough beast, Marianne Moore's "What Are Years?" Many ordinary people wrote poetry as well, some of it collected and reprinted by British Poet Laureate Andrew Motion: "Poetry is the form we turn to instinctively at moments of intensity, whether it be to celebrate or grieve. Why? Because of its compressions and distillations, its different perspectives, its meditative pace. Because of its link with our strongest emotions. Because of its power to console. Because of its separation (of whatever degree) from ordinary speech, which creates a sense of occasion. Because of its implicit demand to remember."⁴

The qualities of compression, mnemonics, emotion, and consolation in poetry provide some directions about how it might be a paradigm for active, student-centered teaching in the university as well as primary and secondary education. Collins argues that teaching poetry offers some fundamental cognitive and intellectual skills, and that reading a poem "replicates the way we learn and think." He sees many parallels between poetry and learning: "When we read a poem, we enter the consciousness of another. It requires that we loosen some of our fixed notions in order to accommodate another point of view . . . To follow the connections in a metaphor is to make a mental leap, to exercise an imaginative agility, even to open a new synapse as two disparate things are linked." Collins thinks of poetic form as "a way of thinking, an angle of approach," that helps students understand how information must be "shaped and contoured in order to be intelligible."⁵

Indeed, Robert Scholes (Brown) believes that English teachers, and especially the New Critics, are to blame for poetry's sad decline, and that the New Criticism was "bad for poets and poetry and really terrible for students and teachers of poetry." The "diminished status" of poetry, he argues, is as much the fault of "well-intentioned teachers" as reluctant and ignorant students. *Understanding Poetry* was one of the most influential textbooks ever published, but the Brooks-and-Warren approach to reading poems "had

the effect of purging the curriculum of the very poems that had once functioned to give students textual pleasure, thus preparing them to take an interest in poetic texts that did not display their hearts so obviously on their poetic sleeve.” Further, the New Critical approach hammered out by teachers at Yale and elsewhere emphasized a technical terminology of irony, paradox, tension, and symbolism which took precedence over human interests and feelings.

In order to restore poetry to a more central position in the literary curriculum, Scholes argues, “we must select from a fuller range of poetic texts, and we should present them in a way that encourages readers to connect the poems to their lives.” He believes that “the poet’s life and world are relevant.”⁶ In short, Collins and Scholes stress the accessibility of poetry rather than its difficulty, and encourage students to start with the poets and poems who are most directly meaningful to them, even when these are poets and poems despised by the New Critics and their pedagogic heirs: Edna St. Vincent Millay, or even Edgar Guest. Their idea is that with poetry, as with other genres, students must begin with the familiar and emotionally relevant, and move from there to more complex forms and historically-distant works.

Teaching Poetry and Learning Techniques

In teaching poetry, every instructor will need to call upon and combine a range of techniques and methods. Teaching an individual poet or a single poem involves different problems than organizing a whole course. Obviously, much depends on historical issues, and how familiar the language and reference and context of the poem will be to readers. But no one can argue that it is easier to teach the avant-garde L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets than Chaucer. The teacher has to ask herself about the intended audience of learners – beginners, advanced, majors, graduate students, dabblers, artists, scientists?

Ideally, whenever we teach, we will be steeped in the literature at hand, overflowing with ideas about how to present it. Realistically, however, we are often in the situation of the hypothetical teacher of shorter Elizabethan poetry, addressed by Patrick Cheney: “You are teaching a course . . . for the first time, you have not had adequate time to prepare it, and . . . you are anxiously searching for concrete advice. In other words, you are alone on the platform. The night is bitter cold, you are sick at heart, and you feel harrowed with fear and wonder. What follows aims to help you pass the minutes

of this night: a . . . poetry survival kit.”⁷ Teaching methods are an all-purpose poetry survival kit.

1 *Subject-centered methods*

Poetics

The poetic territory immediately presents problems because it comes with a specialized technical language. Marjorie Perloff, who has written numerous books on experimental and avant-garde modern and contemporary poetry, defines poetry in terms that are “quite conventional and classical. I believe a poem differs from routine or normal discourse (like this statement, for instance) by being the art form that foregrounds language, in its complexity, intensity, and, especially, *relatedness* . . . In the poetic text, everything is related to everything else – or should be – the whole being a construct of sameness and difference in pleasing proportions.”⁸ Faculty have to decide how they will teach the subjects of poetics, metrics, and prosody. Jonathan Arac (Columbia) believes that “without attention to prosody, poetry may seem like arbitrary magic rather than a codified technology of verbal power.”⁹

Diane Middlebrook taught her first poetry courses in 1966 – Introduction to Poetry (now the required course for majors at Stanford), and Poetry and Poetics. Talking about poetry, she believes, is about technique and formal history, so the texts can be from anyplace. On the level of course planning, she believes every course needs a throughline, to establish boundaries. She organizes the introductory course around four topics: narrative, lyric, satire, and image, as an efficient way to show how poetic language has been generated and renewed.

Middlebrook, a poet herself, sees students’ resistance to learning poetics as the main disadvantage of teaching poetry. She believes that in order to understand the special nature of poetry, students have to grasp the almost platonic quality of poetic forms: “The challenge is to bring alive the idea that poetry exists in the abstract before it exists in particular. The most exciting moments come when the students get that. Poetry is written in a line of syllables with sonic and auditory relationships. The sonic patterns encode a set of meanings that are already there.” Middlebrook assigns a textbook, M. H. Abrams’s *Glossary of Literary Terms*, as background and insists that to understand poetry you need “a precise vocabulary.” Nevertheless, she adds, “students need direct encounter with poetry, not just abstractions.” “In teaching blank verse, for example, we look at Wyatt, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Wallace Stevens. The blank verse line is susceptible to

variation by a strong poet. We look at the way the 10-syllable beat can be changed.”¹⁰

Metaphors

Some teachers have used metaphors and themes to organize the reading of poetry. One very ingenious idea comes from Julia Reinhard Lupton (University of California, Irvine). Lupton uses the imagery of flowers to organize a course on Renaissance lyric: “A glance at the social life of flowers in the contemporary world can draw on your students’ local knowledge as a resource for reading Renaissance poetry. The floral business depends on love and death . . . But while funeral flowers often remain attached to a living plant, the flowers of romance are almost always cut flowers, displaying that element of cultural refashioning that signals the frustration that gives sexual desire its special structure and urgency. (I also like to tell my students that potted plants make good gifts for Mother’s Day but not for Valentines Day, and that receipt of a living plant from a boyfriend or girlfriend often indicates that the romance itself is dying.)” Lupton suggests that “the sexual and linguistic life of flowers offers a sensuous, immediately accessible center around which the potentialities of rhetorical, mythopoetic, and psychoanalytic criticism can blossom in any classroom.”¹¹

Genres

Heather Dubrow (University of Wisconsin) notes that genre criticism is sometimes identified with an older, outmoded approach to literature, but that she finds it a good way to teach poetry. In a course on sixteenth-century poetry, she tried organizing the semester in terms of genre. Even when genre is not at the center of the course, Dubrow tries to acknowledge the difficulty of literary form for undergraduates, and help them relate it to popular and social forms they already know.¹²

Stephen Regan suggests that “courses with a strong generic emphasis can be powerfully effective in opening up discussion of the poem in history. A carefully structured course on the sonnet can amply demonstrate the close relationship between eloquence and power . . . and it can also show how the sonnet flexibly accommodates a range of very different voices over several centuries: the radical, republican voices of John Milton and Tony Harrison, the anguished, confessional voices of George Herbert and Gerard Manley Hopkins, the intimate amatory voices of Elizabeth Barret Browning and Christina Rossetti.” He also suggests teaching a short course on the elegy, “juxtaposing ‘Lycidas’ with later works such as Auden’s elegy ‘In Memory of W. B. Yeats’ and Heaney’s ‘The Strand at Lough Beg.’”¹³ Roland Greene teaches the lyric. “How the genre developed makes a compelling object of

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study, describing a fairly strong literary-historical narrative, and drawing on the vantages of gender, institutions, politics, print, and religions.”¹⁴

Background

We need to keep in mind that students outside of Stanford, Oxbridge, or the Ivies may need more subject-centered training before they can even think about prosody or metaphor. George Klawitter of St. Edward’s University (Austin, Texas) believes that undergraduates need a detailed study guide and supplementary reading in order to understand and enjoy Milton. His study guide to Book 9 of *Paradise Lost* is designed to be “sequential . . . no question anticipates material that comes later. It makes no sense to ask students how Pandemonium contrasts with heaven until students reach a description of heaven.” His six-question study guide, and handouts, for Book 9 asks students to take up issues of tone, biblical creation sources, gender, dialog, and genre with reference to specific passages and lines.¹⁵

Michael M. Levy, who teaches at the University of Wisconsin, Stout, describes his students as “lacking virtually all the extensive, historical, literary, mythological, and theological information necessary to even a partial understanding of the poem.” He tries to give them some historical and biographical background, in part because “they honestly do not understand why anyone would want to write a poem.”¹⁶

2 Teacher-centered methods

Reading aloud

A dramatically-effective method of teaching poetry is reading it aloud. Hugh Kenner (Johns Hopkins) is a believer in the physical properties of the poem. He recalls with affection a student who had learned to recite poetry from her father, and knew “The Ancient Mariner” by heart before she could talk. She was a wonderful student, because “she needed no persuasion, notably, about poetry’s ancient mnemonic function.” But rather than having his own students memorize, Kenner reads the poem aloud himself “with force propelled by a heritage of Welsh preachers. 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 at which the students encounter the words. And it nudges them, continually, from eye to ear. Maybe even, they parody me in the dorms. If so, they’re beginning to vocalize.” Only after students have listened to the poem does Kenner move to close reading.¹⁷

Camille Paglia's favorite teacher at SUNY-Binghamton, Milton Kessler, read poetry aloud "making great use of dynamics, another of the losses rock music has suffered since the Sixties. Like the blues shouters, Kessler could roar, then drop off to a rasp or whisper. Poetry was music-drama. I recently learned that Kessler had studied voice and opera as a young man and had even been a spear carrier at the old Met."¹⁸

Whether or not they can claim a genealogy of Welsh preachers or experience as spear-carriers, many teachers see reading aloud as an important step in teaching poetry. The medievalist Donald Howard was keen on having the professor read many passages of Chaucer aloud, even if he is "hopelessly without histrionic ability." But having students attempt to read, he thinks, is "embarrassing to the reader and boring to all."¹⁹

Lecturing

Teaching a poem for the first time, Diane Middlebrook will plan three lectures: technique, trope, and emotion. The lecture is an effort to make the text choices "illustrative of the way that emotional and cultural intelligence is transmitted in the poem." Middlebrook considers T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" the "most important poem for captivating students, for reaching them where they live." She begins by stressing a detached question of genre and literary history – the poem as a dramatic monologue, descending from Browning. Engagement with the author comes later. Understanding the techniques of the dramatic monologue points up the way the poem works against the "identification with the lyric 'I.'" Middlebrook also "pulls out the pronoun moments" and emphasizes the role of the implied listener: "'Let us go then, you and I.' Who is the 'you?'" An answer lies within the poem, and by the end of the process, Middlebrook hopes students will see that the fragmented subjectivity of the narrator makes You and I both parts of himself. By the ending – "Human voices wake us and we drown" – I and you can come together.

She always emphasizes the beginning and the ending of poems, "because the poem is circular, and requires understanding of opening and closure." Second, she looks at allusions. What is Hamlet doing in the poem? Since most students will recognize the allusion, they are allowed "to discover that they already know something about Prufrock from their literary education."

3 Student-centered methods

Lecturers can present, explain, and demonstrate the subject matter of poetic analysis and interpretation, but telling the students about it is not the same as involving them in it. Poetry is well suited to the active classroom,

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Diane Middlebrook thinks, because “it’s not like anything else. In poetry you read everything, including the punctuation. Everything is an inexhaustible site of reading and interpretation. It’s not just something you can learn on your own; poetry is best consumed in public. We need to hear other people talking about it. Even a professor might impose too swift a closure on meaning without a student’s fabulous intervention. And two equally plausible interpretations can exist together.” The potential power of teaching poetry depends on active student engagement with both poetic language and meaning.

Memorizing

The oldest pedagogical method for teaching poetry is memorization. Many of us will recall having to learn poems by heart in elementary school or high school, or memorizing lines and poems voluntarily. I still can recite several of Shakespeare’s sonnets, Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” and Browning’s “My Last Duchess,” along with a great deal of less reputable and politically-incorrect verse including Robert Service and Vachel Lindsay’s “The Congo.” Knowing poems by heart was once the sign and the pride of an educated person. Now that skill is disappearing. Having students memorize poems seems like a rote exercise, more suitable for the schoolmarm than the professor, and out of place in the modern classroom.

Yet both poets and distinguished teachers of poetry still recommend memorization as a useful pedagogical tool. The great academic champion of poetic memorization in our time is Harold Bloom. As he recalls, “as a boy of eight, I would walk about chanting Housman’s and William Blake’s lyrics to myself, and I still do, less frequently yet with undiminished fervor.” Bloom sees memorization as the first significant step in reading poems. “Silent intensive rereadings of a shorter poem that truly *finds* you should be followed by recitations to yourself, until you discover that you are in possession of the poem.”²⁰ Before he gets to detailed analysis, Bloom emphasizes what he calls “possession-by-memory,” the poem’s accessibility to memorization, because of its relative brevity and its internal mnemonic devices. Once committed to memory, he believes, the poem has the capacity to induce a sense of transcendence in the reader who recites it. “I know many people,” he concludes, “who continually recite poems to themselves in the awareness that the possession of the poem helps them to live their lives.”²¹

Alice Quinn, the poetry editor of the *New Yorker*, agrees. Quinn explains that “memorizing allows you to experience language, to experience privacy. When you are memorizing poems, you are in an intimate connection with the person who made them. It is a profound source of spiritual nourishment.” In her courses on poetry at Columbia University, she told a reporter,

“she makes all her students memorize poems, an experience, she says, in an age when memorization is frowned upon, that irrevocably changes them. It is no accident, she says, that most poets who teach insist on the students being able to recite poems from memory. ‘It gives them a great sense of how the thing is made, the sounds, how the words are chiming, a great sense of the current of the thought and the beautiful labor poems achieve.’”²²

Billy Collins is another strong advocate of memorization. “Anyone who has taken a poetry course with me,” he writes, “knows that I am big on memorization.” Why memorize? Because, he explains, “to memorize is not only to possess something . . . It is to make what is memorized an almost physical part of us, to turn it into a companion.” Poetry is especially suited for this because “it began as a memory system. Mnemosyne was, by Zeus, the mother of all the Muses. In poetry’s most ancient form, the now-familiar features of rhyme, meter, repletion, alliteration and the like were simply mnemonic devices – tricks to facilitate the storage and retrieval of information, and vital information at that.” In his utopian university, all students would recite a few lines from a poem as they receive their degrees.²³

Recitation

In Diane Middlebrook’s classes, the students read the poem aloud. Middlebrook believes there is a correct way to read poetry: “The line ending is a marker and a pause the ear must note. Both syntactical units and the line ending must be stressed, so that the ear can distinguish between syntactic and structural units. Denise Levertov calls the unpunctuated line ending ‘half a comma.’ That enjambment is important. Moreover, the reader of a poem is not an actor but a musical instrument. Students can interpret, yes, but they need also to show the melody. Poetic and emotional stresses fall in different places. I tell the students to read poems into a tape recorder for practice.”²⁴

Even in the course on political poetry I have discussed in chapter 2, where he determines the intellectual agenda, Cary Nelson has his students read or chant the poems in chorus. “We did a lot of oral performing of poetry,” he notes; and “choral classroom readings . . . worked extraordinarily well for some of the sound poems of the 1920s . . . Reading them aloud in class – sometimes in unison and sometimes contrapuntally – students discovered uncanny power and humor in texts that had previously seemed meaningless.” But he had to admit defeat in his effort “to win some sympathy for the most blatantly pro-Soviet revolutionary poems of the early 1930s . . . I can still remember the dull, flat sound of thirty-five students unenthusiastically reading the line ‘All Power to the Soviets’ from Sol Funaroff’s ‘What the Thunder Said: A Fire Sermon.’”²⁵ However grim this moment, it was

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better for the students to read the line than having to meet it mute on the page, or hear the professor proclaim it.

The commonplace book

During a period in which many teachers besides Nelson, especially those who are teaching women poets before the nineteenth century, are challenging the poetic canon enshrined in anthologies, canon formation will be a lively classroom topic. Many teachers of poetry require students to assemble a commonplace book, or personal anthology, in which they record their own favorite lines and verses from the period, with an introduction that explains their principles of selection. Diana E. Henderson (MIT) asks her “students to compose their own commonplace books, handwritten rather than typed, in which they may include their meditations, verse, and illustrations, as well as passages they found memorable in our reading.”²⁶ Caroline McManus (California State University at Los Angeles) has her students organize their commonplace books topically. In a Renaissance poetry course, she may have them adopt the categories from Robert Allott’s *Englands Parnassus*: “Art, Beautie, Chastitie, Death, Despaire, Gifts, God, Greatnes, Heart, Honour, Jealouzie, Kisses, Lechery, Love, Marriage, Nature, Night, Pride, Princes, Sleepe, Teares, Time, Treason, and Venus.” At the end of the course, students select one of these topics for a term paper.²⁷

Clark Hulse recommends using the Web for this purpose: “The Web creates an easy way for students to make their own commonplace books simply by browsing, cutting, and pasting at a Web site . . . Students creating such personal anthologies should be encouraged to rework the material thoroughly – by arranging and juxtaposing, throwing in significant visual material, retitling poems, writing short linking commentaries or fictional biographical vignettes, or even rewriting the poems themselves as it is necessary, useful, or desirable.”²⁸

Writing poetry

Should a course on poetry also be a course on creative writing? Now that creative writing programs flourish at most campuses, the art of composing poetry has been detached from the history, understanding, and analysis of poetic language. But many teachers maintain that even a brief personal struggle with the Muse, and with the structures and strictures of poetic form, is one of the most useful ways to learn to read poetry. According to Frank Kermode, “it can still be argued that people who have actually written Petrarchan sonnets, villanelles, sestinas, ballades, and so forth, whatever the merit of their performances, actually understand more about poetry than people who haven’t, and may have a better understanding of more modern, less

communicable, technical achievements . . . I have encountered, in a graduate literature class, students who have been taught to write poems as a major part of their studies. Belatedly, I am almost convinced that this is where the study of literature ought to begin.”²⁹

More specifically, Scholes recommends spending a lot of time in a course on a single poet whose work covers a wide range of styles and subjects, whose tone varies from the harsh to the tragic – perhaps Robert Herrick. He thinks students should also be encouraged to imitate the poet’s forms, from brief epigrams to sonnets and so on.

But whether or not the study of poetry ought to begin with writing it, writing poetry can be an illuminating and memorably hands-on part of a course. Caroline McManus asks students to write a sonnet. “With the experience of composition comes humility and less dismissiveness of the sixteenth-century sonneteers’ achievements.”³⁰ Diane Middlebrook gives her students an assignment to write a sonnet on a classic trope, such as “the hunter hunted.” Heather Dubrow points out that “writing assignments that involve actually composing a text in a genre, though difficult and upsetting for some students, prove stimulating for others.” She has been successful in encouraging her students to “think about that genre by simply creating a couplet.”³¹

McManus also types up all the student writing, and circulates it to the class without names – a technique that reinforces their involvement in the assignment, but a bit tricky, because sometimes students are embarrassed by having their efforts made public and exposed to criticism, even under conditions of anonymity. If you are going to circulate student writing, you need to make it clear to the students at the start of the course.

Parody is an excellent method of teaching as well. Kristine Haugen, teaching “Rape of the Lock,” had students in groups of four “come up with their own mock epics. I said they had to include a hero, a villain, a conflict and resolution (i.e. a plot), at least two symbols freighted with extreme poetic significance, divine ‘machinery’ and the name of a muse they would invoke. The subjects they chose showed that if nothing else, they’d gotten the point from Pope that making a mock epic usually involves applying epic tropes to familiar settings.” In a Chaucer course, a student “brought in some video footage of the Princeton Triangle Club’s skit called ‘W.O.B. seeks S.W.M.’ It began with a red-headed, gap-toothed mama signing up for a video-dating service and introducing herself as ‘Bath, Wife of.’ The sales assistant then springs to her feet and with fanatic awe and says, ‘Not *the* Wife of Bath – proto-feminist icon?’ Then the Wife launches into a song-and-dance number, half in middle-English, for which she is joined by three guys dressed as the Pardoner, the Parson, and the Cook. After much laughter and merriment

had by all, we launched into questions from the students and myself, such as ‘Is the Wyf a feminist?’ and ‘How do we define feminist?’”

Writing about poetry – the portfolio

John Webster (University of Washington) has his students keep a portfolio of their writing on poems throughout the term, breaking down the writing assignments into blocks geared to “helping less-experienced readers develop a method for first noticing and then exploring poetic language. With my prompts, I try to break the process of reading into discrete steps: early in the quarter the tasks run heavily toward locating effects to explore; later I ask for more sustained exploration and argumentation. I follow the same principle in individual units as well. When I teach sonnets, for example, though my large-scale goal will be to leave students able to develop readings of sonnets as compressed, miniaturized plays, each with characters, a dramatic situation, and a plot, my first prompt is very simple . . . for their first response paper, I only ask that they notice and explore three to five words that seem to have a special role in the poem.”

“Students also benefit greatly from the portfolio’s providing a concrete place in which they can see their own work grow. This is true literally; by course end students will have accumulated thirty to forty pages of writing about Elizabethan poetry, all of it produced by their own hands. But the sense of a student’s work growing has a more abstract force, for as students review their work to write the self-reflexive essay, they can see for themselves how much more sophisticated their thinking has become.”³²

Comparison and contrast

One of the most effective ways to show students how poetic language works is to have them compare a poem with a prose statement of the same theme, or compare two or more poems on similar themes. Roland Greene “might take a short poem and put it alongside a suggestive English or other prose text from the period, observing how the two texts elucidate each other, and then compare the same poem with a roughly similar poem from a contemporaneous continental or American society.”³³

Jonathan Arac regularly uses comparison to teach poetic structure: “We read Johnson’s ‘On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet.’ Juxtaposing this work with Gray [sonnet on the death of Richard West and ‘A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal’], we stage a fruitful comparison of three poems of mourning from a fifty-year period. We begin by noting in the three poems the very different emphases between focus on the speaker (almost total in Gray) and focus on the deceased (almost total in Johnson). Wordsworth might then seem to reconcile the extremes of his two predecessors, but in his poem students

usually find, frustratingly, less of the detail they value about either speaker or deceased. I then change this line of discussion by asking the question ‘Which would you prefer to have as your memorial?’ Students are often surprised to discover that they prefer Johnson.”³⁴

I have found it effective to begin classes on Emily Dickinson by having students compare versions of her poems as they appeared in anthologies pre-1960, with all the idiosyncracies of diction, imagery, and punctuation edited out, and in the definitive edition taken from manuscripts. Here, for example, are the two versions of the third stanza of one poem:

The Chariot

712

We passed the school where
children played,
Their lessons scarcely done;
We passed the fields of gazing
grain,
We passed the setting sun.

We passed the School where Children
strove
At Recess-in-the-Ring-
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain-
We passed the Setting Sun-

Having students note the differences between the two versions, and then try to account for them is a good way for them both to understand Dickinson’s uniqueness and also see how that uniqueness violated expectations of women’s poetic composition. Such an exercise also provides opportunities for arguments about taste and value.

Working from what students already know

Many teachers invite students to use lyrics of popular songs as a way of getting started on poetic language; some textbooks and handbooks actually include lyrics like Bob Dylan’s “Highway 61 Revisited,” and invite students to compare it to poems like Yeats’s “Easter 1916.”

Kristine Haugen uses astrology and horoscopes as a way of illustrating beliefs in determinism and destiny. “A few tried to deny that they ever read horoscopes in the paper; others gleefully admitted it, and they chatted about who was what sign. I pointed out that modern astrologers don’t predict only events on the basis of your sign, they also predict your personality or innate characteristics on the basis of it. We applied this distinction of personality and event first back to *Paradise Lost*, and then back to ‘The Nun’s Priest’s Tale,’ where the rooster is deceived because of his urbanity, which is probably innate to roosters.”

Irene Tayler has a different problem teaching Blake at MIT, where students are brilliant scientists, studying humanities, and Romantic poetry,

only as a supplement to their core work in mathematics or engineering. She sees Blake as a “system builder” who especially appeals to these young thinkers. Her teaching methods stress the visual and analytical before the historical and aesthetic. Tayler gives an introductory lecture on Blake as a poet and artist; her first assignment is for students to describe in as much detail as they can the characteristics of a single plate from *Songs of Innocence*. In the next class, she puts up a slide of the plate, and all compare what they have seen. The effect, she says, “is electrifying. These students are trained observers who pride themselves on scientific accuracy and meticulous attention to detail. But each has seen some minute particular that the others have not, and the resulting experience is at once humbling to each and exhilarating to all. They are learning a new way to see, and from my point of view the less they know about Blake the better, for most of them having their first adult experience of struggling to understand in the absence of a preformulated system.” Only after discussing the plate do they turn to the text, which further complicates the act of interpretation. Tayler then repeats the process with *Songs of Experience*.³⁵

Putting It All Together: Some Examples

No teacher ever uses one method alone. In planning and teaching a poetry course, a professor will draw on many techniques, but the best course will include more active than teacher-centered methods. Feminist critic Sandra Gilbert, co-author of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, is also a poet. Gilbert is an eloquent, erudite, and very funny lecturer; we co-taught an undergraduate lecture course on women’s writing at Princeton in the 1980s, and I learned a lot from the way she combined personal stories with literary history, film clips with close readings, biography with prosody. In her discussion classes on Sylvia Plath, she combines a feminist intellectual framework with careful attention to the conventions and techniques of the verse. Explaining the way she teaches Plath’s “Daddy,” about which she has written in many contexts, Gilbert confesses that her first obstacle is the poem’s familiarity to her, and she has developed techniques for breaking through her own “pre-conceived and carefully worked out interpretations” without straying into “eccentric meditations on particular points that continue to puzzle me.” In other words, like many of us, Gilbert tries to avoid either the glib and canned overview, or the hyperspecialized and arcane detail.

She is concerned about having Plath’s poetry overwhelmed by “the invasion of the aesthetic by the biographical.” In order to have students concentrate on the text, she reads it aloud. Gilbert then tries to get them

“to say as much as they can about what they think the text itself means and as much as possible about how it works, how it sounds, how it feels. If necessary, I go around the room, or the table, asking people to mention particular aspects of the poem that interest them and that they would especially like to consider.”

I have mentioned that the most important part of a discussion class is the opening question; Gilbert asks “who the speaker is and what her ‘problem’ is – a question that may seem simple but one that opens out, obviously, into many larger issues.” She follows up on the poem’s Holocaust and vampire imagery, its slanginess, its mythic elements. One resolution of these contradictions for students, Gilbert suggests, would be to relate “Daddy” to issues of modernism and postmodernism; but she finds this an appropriate point to introduce biographical, historical, and social questions, to ask what it meant “to be a woman, born in America in 1932, reading major poetry and trying to write major poetry in the years from 1952 to 1963?” Gilbert goes on to organize Plath’s poetry in terms of relationships to the male literary tradition and confrontations with a female ancestry – the “disquieting muses.” Sharing details of manuscript drafts of “Daddy,” “Lady Lazarus,” and “Medusa” with students, Gilbert points out Plath’s “careful revisions” to show how the poet moved from emotion to craft.³⁶

Jewel Spears Brooker (Eckerd College) teaches *The Waste Land* in a course for freshmen and sophomores. Her approach is to focus on the theme of failed love in the poem, in three carefully-planned 90-minute class periods. For the first, Brooker assigns the entire poem. In her lecture, she offers a close reading of the epigraph and first seven lines of the poem, and provides students with a detailed account of its mythic and literary sources, linking them to the “relation between love and fruitfulness, between lovelessness and waste, in the myths of Frazer and Weston, in the Bible, and in a few well-known works in the Western tradition.”

Then Brooker moves to a more student-centered approach to learning. In preparation for the second class, students reread the poem, dividing it into “nuggets of narrative or drama or song.” They also pair off and practice reading three dramatic fragments aloud: lines 77–138, 139–72, and 215–56 – “scenes of love in the modern world.” In class, students volunteer or are invited to take the dramatic roles in presenting these sections of the poem, and Brooker’s role is “chiefly one of organizing the reading and encouraging discussion afterward;” she asks “a few leading questions about failed love and waste lands.”

For the final meeting, students apply what they have learned; they write an essay showing how other sections of the poem are relevant to the theme of waste lands and their causes. In class, they share their ideas; and Brooker

finds that they not only “have definite ideas on the poem,” but often have memorized some lines. In her conclusion, she stresses the moral and personal values of literary reconstruction: “In taking fragments strewn on the surface of the poem and re-collecting them (both remembering where they came from and gathering them up again), we and our students are shoring up our ruins in a collaborative life-enhancing act.”³⁷

For teachers, comparing two expert approaches to the same course is a useful way to think about theories and methods. The late Donald Howard, for example, could imagine a perfect Chaucer course, which would last a year, include all the work, and effortlessly initiate students into Middle English and the medieval world view. But in reality, he admits, students will read *The Canterbury Tales*, if anything. And if teachers of Chaucer disagree on methods, they must agree on goals: “To put the student in touch with the mind of Geoffrey Chaucer.”

Howard’s ideas on method are primarily teacher-centered. He begins with the “General Prologue” and the “Knight’s Tale” – the prologue because it establishes the whole, the tale because it is the high-minded template of romantic ideals against which the rest must resonate. But Howard also points out obstacles in this process. The prologue is always heavily footnoted, and he advises students to skip most of the annotation and read for meaning. The tale is beyond students’ linguistic expertise, and Howard lets them read it in a normalized-spelling version. Indeed, he believes that Chaucerians often make a fetish of Middle English scribal spelling, and that it just gets in the way of student enjoyment and apprehension.

Once launched, Howard thinks, it’s just a matter of deciding “what order to put the tales in.” He prefers the Ellesmere order of the tales in which the ‘Nun’s Priest’s Tale’ comes last, because “it is the hardest tale to teach.” Indeed, Howard felt that he himself had never taught it with complete success; “to understand it, one must know all those features: courtly love, rhetoric, Geoffrey of Vinsauf on the death of Richard I, medicine, astrology, dreams – you name it. The poor teacher must struggle to explain all this background, and nothing spoils a joke more than explaining it.”

Howard’s view of the best classroom practice is to lecture, and let the students ask occasional questions. “It is one of the pieties of our profession,” he writes, “that a good teacher, instead of ‘lecturing away,’ gets students to speak their thoughts. But Chaucer does not in my experience lend himself to the discussion method; his age is too distant from ours, there are too many facts to be learned, the language presents too many difficulties.”³⁸

But John Fleming (Princeton) disagrees with many of Howard’s ideas. “To omit ‘Troilus and Criseyde,’ Chaucer’s one perfect ambitious poem and one of the best in our literature, is a shame. Highly motivated students –

and there is an important index of self-selection among students who elect Chaucer courses – can do both most of the ‘Canterbury Tales’ and all of ‘Troilus’ in a semester. Obviously two semesters would be better in principle. Howard is right about not worrying too much about orthography, but in practical fact there is no ‘modern’ edition of Chaucer that limits itself to mere spelling. And the difference between reading Chaucer in Middle English and reading him in modern translation is the difference between taking a bath and taking a bath with one’s socks on.”

Fleming also believes that having students read Chaucer aloud is important: “It allows students to ‘own’ the poetry. Learning passable Middle English pronunciation is also a finite task that almost every student can do, and with its achievement comes a feeling of power. But above all Chaucer is a poet of sounds par excellence – you really do need to speak and hear him. Students can see for themselves the ‘modernity’ in Chaucer. They need help in understanding its alterity. And the real excitement for teacher and student alike is the exploration of the dialogue between the two.”³⁹

Overall, the models for teaching poetry – performance, imitation, generic focus, comparison, connection, engagement, evaluation – are traditionally the most hands-on in the literary repertoire. For these reasons, thinking about poetry is a good place to start thinking about teaching literature in general.