

‘POETRY UNINTERESTS ME’

by

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I DO NOT write of those few, the natural lovers of poetry, whose maturing justifies the existence of an English department, but of a general social attitude. The essay, typical of many, from which my title is taken, was by a fifteen-year old grammar school boy: it concluded, with every intention of devastating finality, ‘You do not use poetry out of school’.

Society has little use or respect for poetry, though according it and other ancient monuments some deference; and school-children are commonly indifferent or hostile by the time they sit for the G.C.E. In a recent experiment, the poetry lesson in two boys’ grammar schools was ranked last but one in popularity among the English lessons in every year from eleven to fifteen—the grammar lesson being consistently last; and, as the boys grew older, the general attitude to poetry worsened.

Those who do not deny this hardening resistance to poetry may ascribe it to such incalculable factors as a constitutional inability to appreciate poetry, a poor home-background, insufficient intelligence, the ‘climate’ of a prose age, and so on, rather than to education; and indeed teachers, prone to overestimate the good or ill resulting from their work, show understandable humility in this. Between the ages of eleven and fifteen, certain social and adolescent pressures act against an earlier enjoyment of poetry—older boys need to feel dignified, and find some emotions embarrassing or uncomfortable. With the end of their schooldays approaching, and final examinations near, such boys feel compelled to grasp at a utilitarian success and at experience whose utility they can measure at once. Poetry seems too difficult or else not manly. Younger boys, on the other hand, accept emotional complexities, or not perceiving them are not offended; and, careless of ‘usefulness’, have leisure to be tolerant. A common feeling of uncertainty in the presence of poetry becomes more evident with age, owing to the demands of the experience needed to understand and interpret a good poem, and to the difficulty of a language embodying aims not easily shared. Poetry suffers too in the general reaction when the enthusiastic, willing new boy of eleven first

buds at twelve as a minor cynic: it has to be an exceptional school which is not found out in a year!

Thus, prejudices silent at eleven are voiced, and loudly, by fifteen—as, that poetry is ‘difficult’, ‘useless’, ‘queer’; that ‘poets are long-haired men too lazy to do any honest work’. Liking, rarely, may be admitted; dislike is proclaimed. Gone is the accessibility and the openness to experience of the younger boys. The change is not one of substance: boys do not change drastically in the sorts of poems they like, nor in the subjects that interest them—the humorous but not nonsensical, the heroic or dramatic action, the sympathy that can be shared without awkwardness. All these find constant favour from eleven to fifteen; the very names of the poems boys speak of at fifteen are often those which gave pleasure at eleven. The change is rather in attitude: from acceptance, openness, towards hostility, indifference.

Of major importance is the quality, not the mere fact, of the change in tone. At fifteen there exists in school and between schools a wide range in the quality of the indifference and hostility. This extends from the most overt enmity, uncouth or acute, through dullest apathy, to bewilderment or to a self-critical reassessment of values. Lovers and haters are alike rare, and rarely to be influenced. ‘Most people’ are between. The educator can be concerned usefully with the between, the indifferent majority whose attitudes range from ‘poetry abandoned’ through ‘poetry neglected’ to ‘poetry acknowledged but repulsed’. I would call the first of these attitudes a closed or dead indifference, and the last two an open or live indifference. The educator’s aim should be to keep this mid-state accessible and open to new experience: if he can do so much, poetry is always possible, and the perpetuation of adult social indifference can be eliminated from the common achievements of schooling.

For something happens in school to act as catalyst in, if not to cause, the hardening which I have been describing. Perhaps a quotation from another boy’s essay may give a clue as to what can happen: ‘Tedious is the manner of studying poetry in school’ . . . causing ‘an awful feeling of being squashed and pumpedintone . . .’ Two schools, starting with groups whose attitudes are indistinguishable, can produce very different final attitudes. In one, hostility though present may be articulate and thoughtful; in the other, blind and reactive. In one, ignorance will be reluctant and apologetic; in the other, complacent and aggressive. The expression of emotion will be tolerated, even welcomed, or shrunk from and feared; poems disliked will be forgotten or else vigorously remembered to be used in a rationalised attack; associations to the word ‘poetry’ full and perceptive, or thin and second-hand.

This marked worsening in one school compared with another is centred in teacher and teaching method, and not in the nature of poetry.

In one experiment, a 'closed' indifference resulted when there was a faulty selection of poems for study, whose appreciation was instilled by affixing ready-made and predetermined labels of value, by overmuch learning by heart, and by that doctrinaire style of instruction which may ensure that a given poem will be remembered, but remembered as disliked. This dislike coloured the boys' attitude to all other poetry; for by 'poetry' boys mean 'poems', and generalise from little experience. Such imposed appreciation, with all that it implies of intolerance and insecurity in the teacher, may seem rare, even unrecognisable to most teachers reading this; but I would ask them to consider how rarely in the classroom a natural demand arises for a poem, or is satisfied—and how frequently poetry is staged as a set lesson, maltreated by the arbitrary timing of bells and even by the clumsy fingering of metrical analysis in a way that no civilised audience would brook save under compulsion, and with the reservation of disgust or ironic laughter. Our kindest intentions are often trapped by the rigour of a syllabus or by their very kindness—born of that self-distaste which urges teachers, social workers, parsons and ladies-next-door to improve other people's behaviour, opportunities, morals, or aesthetics. Without meaning to at all, we teach to dominate while believing that we dominate to teach. 'Much that we call education is just a mixture of propaganda and education. It is in defining the child's views for him that ordinary education is dominative and propagandist. Instruction in French, say, is not propaganda. But the various pressures through which the child has been made to accept the view that he ought to learn French—or read the Bible or admire Shakespeare or play cricket—are propaganda.' I quote from D. W. Harding's book mentioned below.

The teacher's task is admittedly a difficult one. He has to find usable poetry in which he need not sacrifice his own meaning to the child's, and yet in which he can allow the child to search for its own child-meaning—and once nursery rhymes are abandoned, this poetry is not very easy to find. He has to allow for individual differences in response even while treating as a classroom-group affair something which is really a private one for each boy. He has to be able to recognise any personal response and to have the power to evoke this; and at the crucial moment, when, as it were, the poem begins to move, he has to get himself out of the way. This last is very hard for the idealistic teacher, who cannot refrain, if the poem will not move, from pushing it along, until boy and poem collide to each other's detriment. The great desire which the teacher has, that the boy should in effect confirm the teacher's values, can do extreme damage to the boy's attitude, which by the denial of the right to its own existence, is forced to nourish a sour immaturity; the teacher's attitude also, in pleading for a child's support, is robbed of independence.

'POETRY CAN BE GOOD IF YOU HAVE A GOOD ENGLISH MASTER'

For the ill state to which poetry has come in our schools and life, I would in the following paragraphs (with all the diffidence of arrogance) suggest some remedies.

'No doubt' (to quote Professor Harding again) 'a great deal of domination is justifiable for practical purposes. But it ought not to be forgotten that a different way—an "integrative" way—of offering one's interests and attitudes to another person is possible.' If a poem is offered as of relevance to an occasion or of importance to the teacher, with no compromise but with no demand for acceptance, then a real rapprochement may be made. The pupil may show less deference towards poetry, but more respect. Deference has only a public face. Training colleges have in this an important duty, to select teachers who do not depend on children for security and satisfaction, and who can therefore be tolerant when children are amusing themselves with 'not-poetry'; and, if it is not too much to ask, who read, even write, poetry themselves—imagine a teacher of music who could not or did not play, however badly, the instrument he taught! If such teachers cannot be found, it would be better to omit poetry from the syllabus.

Practising teachers can do more, perhaps, to acknowledge privacy, to accept variability and instability of response, and to allow the child and its own scale of values to be acted on by the poem itself. They might be aided in this by adopting a more discursive method of teaching English than is at present common—by having a sufficiently wide knowledge, and available texts, to be able to produce a poem to meet a natural situation, rather than for presentation in a set lesson. It would then be less necessary to angle for appreciation—poems would have an automatic importance to which dominant and doctrinaire methods of approach would be seen to be totally irrelevant.

Finally, it is valuable to consider the particularity of children's preferences and dislikes. Poems liked remain in the memory; those disliked fade away, unless they are taught dominatively—then they are remembered, but with a resentment that affects all poetry. That boys talk about certain poems, and a very limited number, makes the selection of suitable poems for them very important. To one boy, for example, 'Fairies' will be 'a silly poem'—but it is 'Fairies' and not 'poetry' that is silly. The danger is, that if care is not taken, 'Fairies' might come to mean 'poetry' for that boy. One should choose poems for boys in accordance with what is known of their desires, rather than read indiscriminately as many poems as chance offers. Personal and local anthologies compiled for each school are most useful here. It is good to provide in this way an acceptable experience of verse, so that a favourable generalisation may arise by fifteen years; if the boys are used to

verse, and read mostly within their experience, they will be readier and more desirous to stretch to the new demands and rewards of later poetry. This is not to say that patronising and inferior poetry should be presented to school-children; the teacher need not abandon his own standards (to have none, or to have totally second-hand ones is likely to be equally disastrous) but still the child must be free to read for his own meanings. In the writer's experience, school anthologies are not often satisfying: they contain material which is neither exciting to the child nor genuine to the adult. There seems to be room for a new anthology based on a survey of children's tried likes and dislikes. Poetry should be genuine, otherwise the boys do not extend their experience; but it should be more than genuine—it is important for it to be enjoyed, or at least for it to be capable of being mastered by the majority of the group. A prejudice for or against poetry, or else an apathetic indifference of staunchest Philistinism, will exist in each child by fifteen years of age: it is desirable for it to be a prejudice for. Children given their own values to try out at eleven to fifteen would perhaps be more capable of meeting wider values later: otherwise, too many will thrust their fifteen-year values on all poetry.

The moral would seem to be that the final attitude of the majority may vary from group to group, but will depend largely on the poems offered recognising as well as challenging the limits of the children's experience, and on the teacher's having standards but not imposing them.

BOOK LIST

- D. W. HARDING, *The Impulse to Dominate*. [Allen and Unwin.]
M. HOURD, *The Education of the Poetic Spirit*. [Heinemann.]
R. J. HARRIS, *The Attitude to Poetry of Boys between the ages of eleven and fifteen*. [M. A. Thesis, London.]

