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Warren  
~~Wimmer~~ & Brooks, from Understanding Poetry  
(1938 edition) *First edition*

## LETTER TO THE TEACHER

This book has been conceived on the assumption that if poetry is worth teaching at all it is worth teaching as poetry. The temptation to make a substitute for the poem as the object of study is usually overpowering. The substitutes are various, but the most common ones are:

1. Paraphrase of logical and narrative content.
2. Study of biographical and historical materials.
3. Inspirational and didactic interpretation.

Of course, paraphrase may be necessary as a preliminary step in the reading of a poem, and a study of the biographical and historical background may do much to clarify interpretation; but these things should be considered as means and not as ends. And though one may consider a poem as an instance of historical or ethical documentation, the poem in itself, if literature is to be studied as literature, remains finally the object for study. Moreover, even if the interest is in the poem as a historical or ethical document, there is a prior consideration: one must grasp the poem as a literary construct before it can offer any real illumination as a document.

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When, as a matter of fact, an attempt is made to treat the poem as an object in itself, the result very often is, on the one hand, the vaguest sort of impressionistic comment, or on the other, the study of certain technical aspects of the poem, metrics for instance, *in isolation from other aspects and from the total intention*.

In illustration of these confused approaches to the study of poetry the editors submit the following quotations drawn almost at random from a group of current textbooks.

The sole critical comment on "Ode to a Nightingale" in one popular textbook is:

"The song of the nightingale brings sadness and exhilaration to the poet and makes him long to be lifted up and

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away from the limitations of life. The seventh stanza is particularly beautiful."

In the same textbook a typical exercise reads:

"What evidences of a love of beauty do you find in Keats's poems?"

But one is constrained to voice the following questions:

1. Is not the real point of importance the relation of the paradox of "exhilaration" and "sadness" to the theme of the poem? As a matter of fact, the question of the theme of the poem is never raised in this textbook.
2. The seventh stanza is referred to as "beautiful," but on what grounds is the student to take any piece of poetry as "beautiful"?
3. Even if the exercise quoted is relevant and important, there is a real danger that the suggestion to the student to look for beautiful objects in the poem will tend to make him confuse the mention of beautiful or agreeable objects in poetry with poetic excellence.

Some of the same confusions reappear in another book: "These lyrics ["Ode to the West Wind" and "To a Skylark"] are characterized by a freshness and spontaneity, beautiful figures of speech in abundance, melody, and an unusually skillful adaptation of the form and movement of the verse to the word and the idea. Their melodiousness is sometimes compared with that of Schubert's music."

But in what, for example, does a beautiful comparison consist? The implication is that the beautiful comparison is one which makes use of beautiful objects. Again, when a student has been given no concrete exposition of the "adaptation of form and movement . . . to the word and the idea" of a poem, and has received no inkling of what the "idea" of a particular poem is, what is such a statement expected to mean to him?

Or again: "To the simplicity and exquisite melodiousness of these earlier songs, Blake added mysticism and the subtlest kind of symbolism." One is moved to comment: In the first

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place, the student can only be made to grasp the function of symbolism in poetry by the most careful investigation of particular instances; certainly, "the subtlest kind of symbolism" should not be flung at him with no further introduction than is provided by this sentence. In the second place, what can the sentence mean on any level? Is it proper to say that any poet "adds" mysticism to anything? And what sort of simplicity is it to which subtle symbolism can be added? Does the *mélange* remain simple? And what possible connection is implied here between the "exquisite melodiousness" and the mysticism and symbolism? In any case, the approach to poetry indicated in this sentence raises more problems than it solves.

To glean from another recent textbook: "Emily [Dickinson] the seer teases us into believing that she has dived into the depths where great truths lie and has brought up new and astounding specimens. Many of her bulletins from Immortality seem oracular. Shorn of her matchless imagery they turn out to be puritan platitudes or transcendental echoes. Her definitions of weighty abstractions are unphilosophical. They are quick fancies, created out of a fleeting mood, and are therefore frequently contradictory. But when Emily failed with logic, she succeeded with imagination." It is impossible, apparently, to determine from what principles of poetic criticism these remarks can be derived. The objection that Emily Dickinson's poetry when "shorn of its matchless imagery" would turn out to be platitudes could be raised with equal justification about the most celebrated passages of Shakespeare. The passage rests on a misconception of the relation of "truth" to poetry, and on a confused notion of what constitutes poetic originality. Certainly, to clarify the issue of "truth" and poetic excellence, or of originality and poetic excellence, would be a very ambitious undertaking; but that fact scarcely justifies a complete fogging of the issue.

Occasionally the writer of a textbook will attempt to deal with poetry as a thing in itself worthy of study; and ap-

parently hoping to avoid the sort of vagueness found in the preceding quotation, will isolate certain aspects of poetry for special investigation. In its crudest manifestation this impulse leads to statistical surveys of one kind or another. The student, for instance, is exhorted to count or to classify the figures of speech in a poem; or to define metrical forms. There is a more sophisticated manifestation of the same impulse, as for example, in the following classification of metrical effects:

"Some of the varied effects *produced by meter* are illustrated in the following stanzas:

Sweet softness—

Swiftly walk o'er the western wave,  
Spirit of Night!  
Out of thy misty eastern cave,  
Where all the long and lone daylight,  
Thou wovest dreams of joy and fear,  
Which makes thee terrible, and dear—  
Swift be thy flight!

—Shelley, 'To Night'

Stark simplicity—

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

—Henley, 'Invictus'

The author has said flatly concerning these quotations that the effects described are "produced by meter." The statement is completely misleading and rests upon an imperfect understanding of the relation of meter to the other factors in a poem. A clever student would immediately confute the author by pointing out that the line, "Out of thy misty eastern cave," the meter of which is supposed to communicate "soft sweetness," and the line, "Out of the night that covers me," the meter of which is supposed to communicate "stark simplicity," have *exactly* the same meter. In fact, he might point out that many metrical effects are common to selections which communicate very different emotional effects.

This is not to deny that meter is an important factor in poetry, but it is to deny that a specific emotional effect can be tied absolutely to a particular metrical instance. The selections cited do produce different emotional effects, but the basis for the effect can only be given accurately by a study of the relations existing among all the factors, of which meter is only one.

Another instance of the isolation of one technical feature without regard for the whole context and for the particular poet's method is the following observation in a recent textbook:

"Hamlet's 'take arms against a sea of troubles' is a classic instance of the poet's failure to visualize what he is saying. Longfellow's mariner, in 'A Psalm of Life' 'sailing o'er life's solemn main' and at the same time apparently examining 'footprints on the sands of time,' is another example of confused phrasing."

This passage might be taken as a classic example of the misapplication of an undigested critical principle. We frequently see in textbooks on poetry and in rhetorics the warning against the use of "mixed metaphor." But, of course, in applying this principle one must, in every case, examine the context of the instance, the psychological basis, and the poet's intention.<sup>1</sup> These factors are entirely ignored in the present quotation. For instance, the dramatic situation in the passage from *Hamlet* and the relation of the style to it are dismissed by the high-handed and abstract application of this principle. Incidentally this method would eliminate the following well known passages, among many, from the work of Shakespeare:

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable. . . . *Macbeth*

If the assassination  
Could trammel up the consequence and catch  
With his surcease, success . . . *Macbeth*

<sup>1</sup> This matter of mixed metaphor is discussed at length on pp. 387-391.

Was the hope drunk  
Wherein you dressed yourself? hath it slept since?  
And wakes it now, to look so green and pale . . .  
*Macbeth*

The critic in question would apparently be embarrassed by the imaginative agility required for reading much of Shakespeare's poetry, especially the poetry of his so-called "great period," simply because he places his reliance on the mechanical and legalistic application of a single principle without reference to context.

As a matter of ironical fact, the image involved in the speech quoted from *Hamlet* can be visualized. One has only to remember the stories of Xerxes, and Cuchulain, one who punished and one who fought the sea, to grasp the point. Furthermore, in justice to "The Psalm of Life," which is on enough counts a very bad poem, one can indicate that a little more attentive reading will reveal the fact that the mariner who sees the footprints is not actually on the high seas at the moment, but is, as the poem specifically says, a "shipwrecked brother."

The editors of the present book hold that a satisfactory method of teaching poetry should embody the following principles.

1. Emphasis should be kept on the poem as a poem.
2. The treatment should be concrete and inductive.
3. A poem should always be treated as an organic system of relationships, and the poetic quality should never be understood as inhering in one or more factors taken in isolation.

With the hope of giving these principles some vitality the editors have undertaken this book.

This book must stand or fall by the *analyses* of individual poems which it contains. These *analyses* are intended to be discussions of the poet's adaptation of his means to his ends: that is, discussions of the relations of the various aspects of a poem to each other and to the total communication intended. Obviously, the analyses presented in the early sections of this book are simple and very incomplete accounts of the prob-

lems involved. But the analyses become more difficult as the student is provided with more critical apparatus and becomes more accustomed to the method. The analyses, therefore, form parts of an ascending scale and should not be studied haphazardly.

The general organization of the book is, likewise, determined by this scale of ascending difficulty. The book has seven divisions. Section I deals with poems in which the narrative element is relatively important. Poems of this general nature appear here because the narrative interest seems to afford the broadest and most unspecialized appeal to the ordinary student. The basic question behind the analyses in this section is: *what distinguishes the poetic treatment of a story from the more usual prose treatment?* Section II deals with poems in which the narrative is merely implied or is suppressed in favor of some such interest as that in psychology or character. Section III takes up another approach, that of the poet as observer rather than as narrator. The material in this section ranges from poems which ostensibly are simple, objective descriptions to the last poems, in which description emerges with a definite symbolic force.

Section IV takes up one of the more specialized technical problems, that of the nature of rhythm and meter as means of communication. The analyses in this section naturally emphasize the technical considerations of verse, but the attempt is constantly made to indicate the relation of these considerations to the others which the student has already studied. In Section V are considered some of the ways in which tone and attitude are communicated to the reader. The poems of Section VI present some special problems in the use of imagery as a device of communication, and those of Section VII raise questions concerning the function of idea and statement.

Although the poems are arranged in these groups, it is not to be understood that the topics which determine the arrangement are treated in isolation. As a matter of fact, the analyses

and questions which are appended to each poem aim at making the student aware of the organic relationship existing among these factors in poetic communication. Obviously, any poem whatsoever would, finally, raise the questions associated with all of these topics. Questions involving imagery, for example, occur even in Section I and are treated in the analyses. Pedagogical convenience, however, demands that special attention be focused on special problems; but, as has been said, it does not demand that those problems be treated in isolation. A poem, then, is placed in any given section because it may be used to emphasize a certain aspect of poetic method and offers, it is hoped, an especially teachable example. But these classifications must be understood as classifications of convenience. Indeed, it might be a fruitful exercise for the students to return to poems in early sections after they have acquired more critical apparatus.

The poems, as has been pointed out, are arranged in a scale of increasing difficulty. Usually, poems of the simplest method and of the broadest general appeal appear in the early sections. But such a scale, of course, cannot be absolute. For example, a poem like "The Ancient Mariner," which appears in Section I, is on absolute grounds more difficult than many poems appearing in later sections. But it does offer a strong narrative interest. Furthermore, the poems in each section offer a scale of ascending difficulty in regard to the particular problem under discussion. Since this is the case, if poems toward the end of each of the later sections prove too difficult in certain classes, they may be omitted without impairing the general method.

Although the arrangement of poems adopted in this book is one of convenience, it is based on two considerations: first, on aspects of poetic communication, and second, on pedagogical expediency. Therefore, it is hoped that the present arrangement stands on a ground different from the arbitrary and irrational classifications frequently found in textbooks that depart from simple chronological order—classifications

such as "lyrics of meditation" and "religious lyrics" and "poems of patriotism," or "the sonnet," the "Ode," the "song," etc.

If one accepts the principle that one must teach by a constant and analytical use of concrete examples, then the nature of the *Introduction* will be readily understood. The *Introduction* does not attempt to arrive at a "definition" of poetry or to explain, for instance, the workings of imagery or meter. It attempts, instead, to dispose of a few of the basic misconceptions with which the teacher is usually confronted in the class room, and therefore to prepare the student to enter upon an unprejudiced study of the actual poems. Likewise, the *Glossary* of critical terms is based on the idea that the teaching of the book will be by concrete example. The *Glossary* does not provide a set of definitions to be memorized all at once by the student. Rather, it provides definitions and an index of cross references to concrete applications of definitions, which the student can consult as the occasion demands. Even the schematic presentation of metrical terms has been relegated to the *Glossary*, although there it is so organized that it may be studied, if desired, as a consecutive discussion. But even in the case of metrical study, the editors suggest that the general principle of the book be applied.

There are two objections to the method of the present book which may occur to a teacher at this point. It may be objected that this text by its number of analyses attempts to usurp the function of the teacher and to do by the written word what can better be done by the spoken word. Or, second, it may be objected that the judgments of literary value which are involved (and necessarily involved) in the analyses are dogmatic and perhaps often in error.

In answer to the first objection it may be urged that: first, the analyses, if they are at all effective, relieve the teacher of a certain amount of preliminary drudgery and free him for a critical and perhaps more advanced treatment of the unanalyzed poems in each section of the book; second, since no analyses here could pretend to final completeness, a cer-

tain amount of explanation and extension will be required even in treating poems which are analyzed; and third, the fact that a liberal number of analyses are in printed form gives the student an opportunity for a careful private study of the poems in question. With regard to the second objection—the objection that the judgments in the analyses are dogmatic—the editors can only say that no dogmatism is intended. Naturally, they hope that most of their judgments are reasonable, but even if a teacher disagrees with an individual analysis, an explanation of that disagreement should dramatize for the student the basic issues involved. And in fact, the editors feel that disagreement is to be encouraged rather than discouraged in so far as pure impressionism can be eliminated from the debate.

Just as the editors feel that disagreement and debate may be healthful in sharpening the critical instinct of the student, so they feel that the study and analysis of bad and uneven poems will contribute to the same end. A reasonable number of such poems have been included, and a few have been analyzed. The great majority of the poems included in the book, however represent positive achievement. The modern poems included have not been chosen at random, nor merely on the ground of current fashion. They are intended to represent some of the various lines taken in the development of poetic method in this century. In general, it is hoped that the juxtaposition of good and bad poems, and of new and old poems, will serve to place emphasis on the primary matter of critical reading and evaluation.

Although this book is based on a principle, and is not a casual anthology, and although it is organized in the light of that principle, the final effect, it is hoped, will be to liberate rather than restrict the initiative of the teacher. By positing a principle and a definite objective, the book allows the teacher a great deal of liberty in devising correlative approaches to the general end. Although the book does suggest a variety of exercises for the student, such as analyses modeled

on those in the book, comparisons of the prose and poetic versions of the same material, comparisons of poems treating the same theme, etc., the possibility for development along this line is almost infinite and can be adapted to individual needs.<sup>1</sup>

A last word: the editors of this book do not delude themselves that they have here provided, or could elsewhere provide, solutions for any of the fundamental problems of poetic criticism. Nor, least of all, have they provided in this book neat criteria which can be applied in rule-of-thumb fashion. Rather, they hope to present to the student, in proper context and after proper preparation, some of the basic critical problems—with the aim, not of making technical critics, but merely of making competent readers of poetry. At the least, they hope that this book will find some merit in the eyes of those who agree with Louis Cazamian: "that all students of literature should be regarded as historians is an exaggerated and a pernicious assumption. More important still, and much more fruitful than the problems of origins and development, are those of content and significance. What is the human matter, what the artistic value of the work?" So much for the general aim of this book. As for the general method, to quote again from this critic: "it is rightly felt that if the . . . student of literature is to be capable of an intelligent apprecia-

<sup>1</sup> A particularly fruitful source for the development of further exercises will lie in the application of principles developed in later sections of the book to poems treated in earlier sections. For example, the teacher may wish to return, after a study of metrics and related matters, to a poem like "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" with such exercises as the following:

Discuss the technical devices of lines 103-106, 382, and 386.

Or he may wish to return to "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" to ask:

What is the effect of the metrical situation in lines 4 and 32?

For certain classes, the fact that this book has concentrated upon the interpretation and analysis of individual poems may provide an easy and suggestive approach to matters of literary theory and history. After the book has been completed, exercises may be framed, for instance, to relate Wordsworth's theories of diction to his actual practice in "Michael." The student may be asked to discuss lines 89, 169, and 434 in connection with the principle of the "real language of men." And in this connection the tone of the entire poem may be analyzed.

tion, he must go beyond the passive enjoyment of what he reads; he must be instructed, partly at least, in the mysteries of the art. . . ."

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Asterisks (\*) indicate poems which are analyzed

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