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Warren  
~~Warrington~~ & 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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