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# The Teaching of Poetry: Problems and Perspectives

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**Y**early, in conferences and seminars, I am asked about my ideas regarding the teaching of poetry. It is a difficult topic to deal with mainly because teaching is one thing and poetry is quite another thing. To build a pedagogic bridge between the two and to evolve instructional materials that would reward the students are the main objectives of any course in poetry. The process of accomplishing them, their pragmatic actualization, continues to be the big problems.

To start with, we no longer live in a poetic environment. The trimedial language of our social existence is prose. Television, radio and print exert tremendous influences on almost all aspects of our existence, and these influences, experts tell us, are often malignant. True, prose simplifies our communication needs in a fast-pace milieu for decision-making, but it does not provide alternatives for the refinement of our sensibilities. Because prose attends to the immediate and pressing demands of our social intercourse, it is mono-dimensional and mono-directional in its semantic intentions, thus canceling possibilities for suggestive areas of discourse. It is language in a hurry which links easily with the visual madhouse of expression offered by television, video-machines, comic books, and cinema. Our living and dying, to a large extent, occur on a prosaic level, signaled by a style whose vocabulary and configurations derive from a world of inflexible imagination.

Aristotle suggested that the mark of a civilized society is its possession of a metaphoric consciousness. By its agency all citizens are able to communicate on other than literal grounds, thus expanding their linguistic enjoyment and, through their knowledge of the working of literary ambiguities, refining their concepts of things around them. Poetry is just that metaphoric discourse, but our misfortune is that, as a community activity, poetry is practically a lost art to us. Many of us will

live and die without having read a book of poems. Poetic expertise is becoming so specialized a pursuit that it is not hard to imagine its developing into some mysterious occultic practice in the future.

Consequently, it is understandable why the young generations have natural resistance to the study of poetry. It is not their medium; their consciousness has not been shaped by it; they do not employ its language to communicate to others. Given a choice between reading a novel and a book of poetry, without doubt they would pick the novel. For them, poetry is difficult to understand not because of its language but because of its use of language. Whereas prose says something and means it, poetry says something and means something else. In a mono-dimensional and mono-directional community, poetry is counter-productive and non-functional.

It is also understandable why the teaching of poetry is perceived as frustrating and unrewarding. Why then do our educators insist on including poetry in our educational curricula? Because art is benevolent and change is inevitable. Poetry remains to be a cheap but priceless means of humanizing human beings, of making them aware of the truths and values necessary to fulfill their potentials. It is a grand aim, admittedly, but man was meant to reach for the stars. It is because we have been grounded for so long by our prose milieu that though the teaching of poetry is difficult, it must be done. And the teacher must keep on hoping for poetry's eventual ascendancy over prose.

Since poetry is a matter of language, the teacher must make the students aware of the poem's linguistic character. This involves a review of the basics of grammar and composition, with emphasis on parts of speech and types of sentences. For the poem's compositional unit, the stanza, is governed by the same rules as the paragraph of prose discourse. The student must be able to deconstruct verses to show their grammatical and thematical relationship only then will they realize the rationale behind the poet's technique or style. Such deconstruction can be done with visual aids drawings: photographs, films, graphs, charts; gestural and performative means - dramatization, mimes, plays; and mnemonic devices choral interpretation, oral reading.

Using short poems at this stage is advisable, for then the students can grasp the poem's totality without much difficulty. At the same time, the deconstruction will not be complicated. Of course, the rule of thumb in selecting materials is: choose poems that are appropriate to the culture of the class. In other words, poems that will appeal to their intelligence, class background, linguistic ability, etc. The teacher will be in a position to make such selection judiciously. Based on his experience and knowledge of his individual students, he can evolve a reading syllabus that adapts to the conditions of the class. To take up poems above their

culture will be senseless. They can do that later, when they are more prepared. At this point, the objective is to create in them an adequate and positive disposition toward poetry in the hope that, thenceforth, their liking for it will be reinforced.

The teacher must always remember that the test of a poem is in the reading. It has to be heard for much of its beauty to be appreciated. It is unfortunate that this oral aspect has largely been ignored as a result of the tyranny of the invention of the printing press. The poem has been exiled, as it were, on the page, whereas before, it roamed free in the space of the imagination. It lost the music of its orality and alienated its followers. The study of a poem, then, must always start with its proper reading or recitation so that the students may recapture and enjoy the pleasure of its sound patterns. When they do, the meaning pattern will be easy to grasp.

Then the study of the poem's use of figurative language can follow. Here, analysis of the more commonly used figures of speech will be fruitful, since they are the primary tools of poetic suggestiveness or indirection. The meanings and origins of simile, metaphor, hyperbole, irony, apostrophe, synecdoche, metonymy, oxymoron and personification, for instance, must be understood so that their presence and function in the poem can be evaluated. I regard this as a very vital aspect in the teaching of poetry, for by this the student's metaphoric consciousness will be developed. If they can communicate on this level, that is, if they can see the poem as a non-literal unit of utterance, then they are well on their way toward the understanding of any poem.

This understanding, in the main, consists of satisfactorily responding to the following questions:

1) Who is the persona (speaker) in the poem? Every piece of writing, prose or poetry, is a communicative discourse, and a reader must be able to identify (describe) the unseen intelligence talking to him; 2) What is the situation in the poem? This is similar to the setting in fiction, and concerns the conditions of time and place from which the persona is addressing the reader; (3) What is the central idea of the poem? This is simply the main or focal idea (theme), and not, as many wrongly think, the moral lesson. Moral lessons are the proper aim of didactic or epistolary writing, like a sermon, but a poem meditates on human values with universal application; and 4) How does the poem achieve this central idea? This pertains to the formal characteristics of the poem as a work of art - linguistic elements related to style and technique that are expressive of the main idea that the poem intends to convey.

The aesthetic goodness or badness of the poem, if one is to be judgmental about it, depends on its over-all merits and demerits rated on a grading scale determined by factors previously agreed upon. But that can come later on, after the students shall have enjoyed the poem both as writing and as speech.

On the pedagogic plane, what emerges as the common problems for us teachers of poetry in particular and of literature in general, are the following:

1. What poems do I take up in class? This should not really be a problem, since it is assumed that the teacher knows his students' culture - their intellectual character and social background, the resources in the library, and the objective of the course. With a little imagination to work within these conditions and limitations, the teacher should be able to determine the poem suitable for discussion. He must relate it to the students' political, religious, personal, and social realities, otherwise it will be an alien piece of writing to them. He must not forget that, overall, a poem is a sociological utterance and cannot be understood outside the structure of human relationships.
2. Is there only one interpretation of a poem? The richness of a poem resides in the multiplicity of meanings that it offers. In this sense, the more interpretations it has, the better, since these indicate a universality of appeal. The only rule is that these interpretations, to be acceptable, must not contradict each other, but must sustain, strengthen, and support each other. If not, some error of analysis has been committed, and the reader should re-examine his reading. There is not only one interpretation of a poem, be it a bad or a good one, for language has a variety of effects and signification on different readers. Indeed, one may read the same poem several times and get a different meaning each time. One, for instance, may concentrate on the social aspect on the first reading, on the religious aspect on the second reading, and on the political aspect on the third reading; his interpretations will not be the same in the three readings, but they will not cancel each other. In fact, they will show the rich layers of meaning available in the poem.
3. Should we teach classical poems or modern poems? It is better to teach both. Classical verse (those regulated by strict canons of meter and rhymes) and free verse are both valid means of poetic expression. The teacher must know their history and nature so that he can then point out certain areas of similarities and differences between these two modes of

expressions. Free verse, actually, is only free from definite meter and rhyme-scheme; in all other respects, it is governed by specific rules of prosody linked to its philosophical framework. Free verse and traditional verse can also be seen as simply a means of linguistic expression and not as ends in themselves. One cannot, therefore, say that a poem is good because it is written in free verse or in traditional verse.

4. How do we know if it is a good poem? We must remember that a poem is good not in a moral but in an aesthetic sense. A poem is a good poem when, using the artistic and linguistic materials demanded by his craft, the poet succeeds in fashioning in his composition that rich multiplicity of meanings mentioned earlier. The good poem changes the reader for the better - it makes him realize, through its skillful marriage of form and content, the authentic state of human conditions. He personalizes this knowledge when he applies it to his own individual situation. This is what we mean when we say that a poem "inspires" us, or that it has a "universal" truth, or that we "learn" from it.
5. What is the best method of teaching poetry? That method is best which achieves the best results. Since environmental factors differ from classroom to classroom and from region to region, the teacher should be innovative in his teaching methodology. Because he will encounter many problems in making his students understand and appreciate the poem, he must adapt his teaching techniques to his milieu. For instance, he must employ audio-visual devices to concretize the ideas in the poem and make the students learn poetic principles. Drawings, pictures, and audio and video-tapes can facilitate understanding of strange and new linguistic concepts. At the same time, they will help the students in justifying or confirming their own interpretations.

Some teachers I know even go to the extent of assigning their students to dramatize the idea in the poem or to make songs based on it. These are valid methods - in fact, they will test whether or not the students have a solid understanding of the poem, for they cannot concretize in drama or song what they have not sufficiently understood. At the same time, they will strengthen the student's imagination for they will be compelled to be creative in these undertakings. Imagination is the engine of poetic creation and of poetic interpretation.

6. Should we teach controversial poems? We are familiar with some modern poets who use 'foul language' - taboo expressions, four-letter words,

etc. - and deal with censurable ideas in their poems. To use such poems in the classroom presumes that the teacher knows his students thoroughly and can guide them without malice through the intricacies of subject and expression. He must be able to show them the motive of the poet in using such language or in dealing with such subject and must analyze whether such usage is justified or not in the context of the rules of the art of poetry. We have observed that, by and large, students in the tertiary level are capable of discussing this kind of poems dispassionately and objectively.