

Why Profess What is Abhorred The Rescue of Poetry

I

As I gathered up my papers at the end of class, a young man approached my desk. I was five weeks into teaching a freshman introduction to literature/composition course at a four-year college in the B.C. Interior. “Well, Tom,” the student said. “You did the best you could.”

His hand indicated my notes for the four-week-long unit on poetry we had just completed; we would begin a unit on short stories the next class. “But in spite of your efforts,” the young man continued, “I haven’t changed my mind. I still hate poetry.”

How can anyone hate poetry? Do they hate sonnets, ballads, villanelles? Rhymed or unrhymed verse? Elizabethan, eighteenth-century, Victorian poets? Robert Frost, Robert Lowell, Robert Creeley? Lyric, imagistic, conversational, language-centred techniques? Narrative or non-narrative strategies? Federico Garcia Lorca, Cesar Vallejo, Pablo Neruda? Sound poetry, concrete poetry, prose poetry? Gwendolyn MacEwen, Susan Musgrave, Erin Mouré? Aboriginal, South Asian, revolutionary, feminist, Rasta, work, black, Hispanic, Nuyorican (New York Puerto Rican) poems? Zbigniew Herbert, Tomas Tranströmer, Yehuda Amichai? Those Australian migrants: Thalia, Jeltje, π.O.?

The statement *I hate poetry*, which I hear in one form or another whenever I teach an introduction to literature class, is like claiming: “I hate music.” Anybody can ferociously dislike Rap or Rachmaninoff, Country and Western or John Cage. But I’ve never heard someone completely dismiss any other form of cultural expression.

Nor are creative writing classes exempt. At the start of each post-secondary introductory creative writing class I teach I outline the genres we are going to cover. Inevitably in response I am informed: “Ugh. Not poetry. I hate poetry.”

Why does this emotion arise? How is it perpetuated? In my collection of essays *A Country Not Considered: Canada, Culture, Work* I argue that one important origin for our attitudes to literature is our formal education “—since school is the only place most of us ever meet people whose job it is to try to show us the worth of literature” (30). What events occur in elementary, secondary and post-secondary classrooms to cause women and men to decide they detest an entire art form?

In my case, I was blessed with a few teachers who managed to communicate—at least to me—a deep affection for literature. This reinforced the enormous delight in poetry evinced by my father during my childhood. Although my father was a pulp mill chemist, he was passionate about reading, and reading aloud, English poets like A.E. Housman and Alfred Noyes, and Canadian poets like Wilfred Campbell and E. Pauline Johnson. Our house while I was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s also contained well-worn editions of *contemporary* Canadian poets—F.R. Scott, Dorothy Livesay, Earle Birney, Irving Layton, Miriam Waddington. The latest volumes by these and newer writers such as Eli Mandel, Al Purdy, and Leonard Cohen continually arrived.

The enthusiasm that my father and to a lesser extent my mother demonstrated for poetry convinced me that the art mattered, that it had a past, present and a future that held value. Contrasted to these beliefs was the dreary mechanistic attitude to poems taken by some teachers I encountered. In these classrooms, we were directed to closely examine lines for the sole purpose of ascertaining stress patterns and rhyme patterns in order to conclude whether a fragment of verse—irrespective of meaning or any other artistic consideration—was trochaic or anapestic, whether rhyme schemes were ABBA or ABAB or LSMFT. And even in university, many instructors insisted on one correct interpretation of ambiguous sections or whole poems: all other possible readings were decreed null and void. Studying poetry thus was like auto shop or the rifle disassembly/assembly drill in army cadets. Full marks were obtainable if you could name the parts correctly as you took the apparatus apart, and full marks were assigned if you could follow the approved method of reattaching the pieces speedily back into working order. The only difference was that a reassembled poem

could not fire a bullet, any more than the poem could be driven someplace. Instead, the lines of words squatted inertly on their white page, blanketed literally or metaphorically with comments superimposed in red pencil. A distorted, hideous thing.

My discussions with my current students lead me to conclude that for the *majority* my worst experiences match their recent interactions with poetry in institutions of learning. During early adolescence these students often sought to express their feelings about their emerging selves in a free-form style of writing they called poetry. At times the lyrics of certain popular songs, the words bolstered by effects generated by the accompanying music, speak to them with unusual force or meaning. Yet encounters like these that suggest the incipient power of words presented in a non-prose format are light-years distant from the way poetry was inflicted on them in school.

Exposure to poetry was used as a measure against which the student was pronounced stupid, unimaginative, a failure. Who would not hate an activity or artifact that authority utilizes to brand us with these labels? Formal schooling in many subjects frequently diminishes a student's self-respect in this manner. Mathematics, history, science classes can be taught so as to primarily instruct us that we are brainless, lazy, worthless. Yet at least in these subjects the teacher can indicate how our shortcomings in these fields will have direct and dire consequences in adult life: these areas of instruction are clearly necessary to succeed on many jobs, or to comprehend what is happening in the world in which we are supposed to be citizens. But poetry? Why are we made to feel badly about ourselves over a subject which no instructor bothers to even *try* to claim has the slightest use outside of school? We can grudgingly admit that we cannot escape the influence on our lives of biology, physics, geography—regardless of how badly taught in school, and of how our reaction to that pedagogy may have damaged our self-esteem. But if there is one subject in which we were pronounced incompetent on which we can *afford* afterwards to vent our anger and dismay at how school labelled us, that subject is poetry. Like any powerless minority lacking status in the larger world, poetry is the perfect receptacle for our rage and frustration, is safe to despise, loathe, abhor.

As a poet, I am not happy with the present situation. Can poetry be taught so that it is not detested, not asked to bear the sins of mass public education? After all, a hatred of poetry does not even restore the self-respect of the despiser. Rather, this abhorrence when expressed serves as a restatement or

reminder of the perceived inadequacies of the person uttering the emotion. So this venting reinforces the pattern that equates the art form with a poor self-image. And the expression of this dislike obviously does poetry no good.

I believe effective change proceeds from root causes of inappropriate or inadequate behavior. We have to ask, then, two radical questions. First: what do we teach poetry *for*? That is, what is our *aim* in including poetry as part of the English curriculum at any level? The second question is: what do we teach *poetry* for? In an era when poetry is a thoroughly marginalized art form, what positive contribution can a poem make to human existence? Whatever poetry's usefulness to society might have been in the past, why seek to encompass the art now in our educational system? My two main questions here are obviously interrelated, although I will consider them in sequence.

II

When I walk into a classroom to instruct people about poetry, what should my intention be? I am convinced that my achievement as an instructor must be judged by whether those who experience my pedagogy leave the class with a love of the art. According to this standard, the student I refer to at the start of this article represents a defeat on my part. But ideally any material I introduce to my students, or any artistic technique I draw to their attention or expect them to become proficient in understanding and describing, will contribute to initiating or affirming an *affection* on their part toward poetry.

I want the students to emerge from the class as enlightened amateur readers of poetry: amateur, where the word means "lover of." Even when we teach creative writing, educational administrators and others are often startled when I insist that our fundamental goal is to produce careful, knowledgeable *readers* rather than professional writers. How much more true is this for the instruction of poetry. Upwards of 98 per cent of those we teach will never become professional critics of poetry (or become poets). So our pedagogy must be shaped toward this reality.

Just as very few students in the fine arts will continue on to become professional painters or sculptors, and just as few people who take guitar lessons will become professional rock or classical guitarists, so the overwhelming majority of those we instruct in our poetry classes will not embark on a career as professional responders to—or writers of—poetry. The foremost objective of our teaching consequently must be to produce an interested and informed *audience* for poetry.

The foundation of any curriculum in poetry should be to provide students with a wide exposure to examples of the art—whatever the historical era or theme or other focus of the course. Students then need to be encouraged, in as open an atmosphere as possible, to articulate and defend their responses to these poems. This goal requires that the student have the tools with which to examine their own reaction to a poem. Students also need the tools to successfully communicate that response to others. The student has to be able to show—not just tell—others why she or he responds as she or he does to a poem (and thus defend her or his reaction). These same analytic skills allow students to thoroughly absorb lessons gathered from their reading, or from hearing the comments of classmates or the instructor about such poems. The student can then more readily adapt or incorporate these lessons into her or his appreciation of the art.

A poetry curriculum therefore must involve a safe, supportive, and informed environment in which students can critique the writing of contemporary or historical authors as well as the response of other class members to these poems. By so doing, the student exercises and refines skills in thinking, writing and reading.

At the very least, a course in poetry should not leave students with a dislike—or *increased* dislike—of the art form. What conceivable use can such a pedagogical outcome be? Yet at present this is the curriculum's net effect on most students. How does this result help the student? Help the art form? Help the arts or humanities or the community or any larger reality or abstraction? To me, a course of studies in poetry instead should improve the student's ability to recognize and enjoy the subtleties as well as the more evident achievements of the art. The student should discover or further augment within himself or herself an awareness of the power of the written word to describe and even to initiate ideas and emotions. The result of the course's accomplishments should be a feeling of pleasurable wonder at what the human race, via this art form—via *words*—has wrought.

I believe that the negative reaction to poetry created by pedagogies employed today arises from a different, unstated curriculum objective: to develop professional critics. My teaching experience convinces me that unless students understand why this or that critical method *enhances* their delight in an art form, the application of any critical theory becomes an exercise in drudgery, in irrelevant make-work. Inculcating and/or preserving a love of poetry must be the intent of any application of critical thought

to the art. The danger in proceeding otherwise is that as each new generation of teachers at any level is trained, these men and women are trained to dislike or despise poetry and poets.

I have certainly witnessed firsthand the consequence of the existing pedagogy not only as a student but as an instructor. B.C. Interior colleges during the past decade have suffered an inflow of new English PhDs produced in graduate seminars that appear to be steeped in either vicious competitiveness or competitive viciousness. Far from producing teachers with a love of the art or the artists in their chosen field, these graduate schools unleash new instructors who behave very much like abused children. Smarting from some series of crushing blows to their self-esteem, the new professors seek to vent their anger on any target they deem powerless—from their hapless students to any colleague they conclude is vulnerable to some form of academic scorn or punishment. Supersaturated themselves with the jargon of the critical stance favored at their alma mater—a jargon which will date the would-be scholars more rapidly than they imagine—these instructors attempt to drench any and all within their academic reach with a language comprehensible only to a highly specialized few. The effect of such behavior on anyone's appreciation of the art form they supposedly profess is no factor for consideration. I can recall one newly-minted colleague spluttering in opposition to a curriculum proposal, opining that the suggested approach was wrong because it “would privilege the writer over the critic.” Multiply such comments by a thousand and you can imagine the atmosphere in which poetry continues to be studied in many classrooms.

So bitter is the environment generated by the latest generation of PhDs that it affects not only the future of poetry but that of the English departments in which these hurting and hurtful men and women find themselves employed. I know of one B.C. Interior department which as a last resort recently sought en masse professional counselling. Since the departmental vote to seek such help was 21 to 7, I am dubious about the ultimate results of this initiative.

Despite such developments, I retain my belief in a syllabus whose goal is to achieve and sustain a love for poetry. As I note above, central to this pedagogical approach is to familiarize students with the broadest possible scope of the art. Regardless of how a course is organized—historically, thematically, or concentrating on technique—the aim here is to ensure that a student does not conclude poetry inhabits only a narrow band of the art's actual

spectrum. The more expansive the student's exposure to poetry is, the more likely the work of some poet will engage the sensibilities of the student.

The women's movement, the new self-consciousness of various minorities, the increased attention to literary translation all have helped make available poetries supplementary to the established canon. A revelation of the full literary context—historical or modern—in which a poet plied her or his art also helps illustrate for the student poetry's immense range.

This need to impress upon students the multifariousness of poetry is subverted, however, by the standard teaching anthology. With rare exceptions, teaching anthologies are generated from existing anthologies rather than from primary source research. As a result, the same set pieces tend to appear over and over. This selection process shrinks poetry to a smaller presence than that required to improve the current circumstances of the art. Anthology editors would claim they are distilling the essence of poetry; I would propose they are desiccating poetry. The endlessly-taught "important" poems become the clichés of teaching: the original power of the poet's expression wears extremely thin after far-too-frequent repetition in classroom after classroom.

Finding alternatives or supplements to the teaching anthology of course involves skill and ingenuity. Technically, the photocopier is an instructor's chief ally in the rescue of poetry (although somewhat threatened by the federal government's new misguided copyright provisions). Also, where the syllabus permits, assigning as a text an entire book by a local writer, or by an author who will be reading in the community or school during the semester, is another means to boost students' awareness of poetry's rich texture and extent.

Discovering *what* to photocopy or assign remains a vital task for teachers wishing to adopt new materials. Obviously if an instructor hates poetry herself or himself, such professional development will be regarded with distaste. I fear in a great many cases this is another result of our existing pedagogy. And if a teacher has been persuaded by his or her own wretched experiences in school that she or he is unable to discern value in any poem not previously approved by others, such a teacher also is unlikely to choose material that will effectively inspire delight or affection in students.

For those with enough self-confidence in their enjoyment of the art to seek fresh poems, at present only a wide reading with an open mind can provide pedagogically useful examples of writing. I would like to see a more formal expansion of the informal sharing of teachable poems that exists among poetry-friendly colleagues who already know each other. Some form

of mandatory continuing education in the pedagogy of literature could serve in a more organized way to provide teachers at all levels with a source of poetics that work well in the classroom to ignite a love of the art in students. This requirement might reinforce the concept that instructors need to expand their pedagogical repertoire throughout their careers in order to continually improve their teaching. Or maybe upgrading should be mandatory only in subject areas where present teaching styles and syllabuses produce demonstrably negative results, as with poetry.

III

Yet, whatever our pedagogical goal, why bother teaching poetry at all? Given that time is at a premium in our educational process, why is poetry a fit subject when the art's current marginal status is attested to by various measurable standards? For instance, small press publishers have complained to me that whereas 30 years ago a new collection of poems by a Canadian author routinely sold a pitiful 1,200 copies, a similar book these days is lucky to sell 500. And this despite a surge in the size of the population, and three decades of phenomenal growth in post-secondary institutions—each of which makes literature courses a requirement for a degree. To the mystification and shame of my colleagues who teach creative writing, during this same period the number of graduates from our programs in imaginative writing also has escalated, without affecting these sad statistics. Even in the U.S., if books by contemporary poets sell more readily, the authors almost invariably are known to the public for having achieved celebrity in other fields: as novelists—Margaret Atwood, for example; or as musicians—Leonard Cohen; or as incarnations of cultural postures or concepts—Sylvia Plath as tormented genius/woman-as-victim, or Robert Bly as a founder of the men's movement.

One societal trend at the dawn of the new millennium is for us more frequently to be spectators instead of participants in our life—to be listeners to music, for instance, rather than singers or performers ourselves. In accordance with this development, I encounter less and less frequently people who enjoy the memorization and recitation of poems. The generation that delighted in knowing by heart Robert Burns or Robert W. Service is vanishing, and is not being replaced. Nor is verse by other poets committed to memory by such an extensive cross section of people as once could recite work by these two bards. Where attraction to types of poetry among a

larger population has recently surfaced—for example, cowboy poetry, or the poetry competitions known as “slams,” or Rap with its insistent rhyming couplets—these forms of the art with greater appeal are primarily oral. Plus, the basis for the more widespread response to these manifestations of poetry is spectacle—consumption of a public performance. With rare exceptions, these versions of the art do not repay close reading; whenever the verse is considered outside of the spectacle (or in the case of popular music, when separated from the musical accompaniment), the words’ emotional power weakens noticeably or disappears. Books by these poets, or by poetry performance artists, do not sell in significant numbers. This is not art one takes home in written form.

The Internet is sometimes lauded as the locale of a renaissance of interest in publishing poetry. As nearly as I can ascertain, though, the establishment of electronic magazines and the enormous opportunity for self-publishing that the ’Net offers remains a matter of “give” rather than “get.” Staring into a cathode ray tube is a notoriously stressful way to receive information of any kind. I have never experienced and cannot imagine reading for pleasure from a monitor screen. Downloading writing from the ’Net, printing it off, and then attempting to read it offers more benign possibilities. But a sheaf of printer paper is in effect an unbound book: a loose collection of sheets, and of an awkward size with regard to portability or ease of perusal. Although I am in close contact with a number of fellow writers, teaching colleagues and students who are ’Net aficionados, I have never yet heard a single one recommend enthusiastically a *poem* they discovered on the ’Net. These ’Net surfers frequently are excited and fascinated by *information* they glean among the electrons. The literature posted at so many sites, though, seems to be scanned simply *as* information, in the ’Net users’ characteristic coasting and skipping over the endlessly unscrolling acres of words in search of a jolt, a charge, some astonishment.

Body hunched forward, face inches from a screen, does not appear to be a posture conducive to a leisurely and careful reading of a literary text. The ’Net may well serve as the depository for poems which formerly the lonely and socially inept consigned to their desk drawer. But of all the literary arts, poetry least rewards the act of browsing, and browsing is the quintessential human interaction with the Internet.

So if poetry today is firmly marginalized, why involve it in our curriculums? My answer originates with the rapt expression of wonder and joy I

encounter each term when a student truly connects with a poem. “Wow,” the student will effuse, “I didn’t know a poem could be about this.” Or: “This poem really touched me in a way I haven’t felt before.” A power exists in these words that completes an emotional circuit between author and reader.

Certain assemblages of words we call poems succeed beyond question at bridging the core solitude of human existence. Each of us is alive in a fleshly and perishable body, linked however tenuously to family and community, to a social past and present, and still each of us labors basically alone to experience and process our life. What *relief*—for surely that is the root of the exhilaration we feel when a work of art overwhelms us—to sense that another human voice possesses the ability to stir us, to reach the ear or eye of our innermost being. We are buried alive in our own personality, but from time to time a poem or sculpture or painting is able to speak reassuringly, wisely, disturbingly, lovingly about the human adventure we share.

Meaningful art is a profound act of solidarity: a declaration, via the artist’s wish to communicate her or his vision to me, of my essential participation in the human story. Just as a tree heard to fall in the forest confirms the sound that event causes, so my acknowledgement of a specific poem’s efficacy at engaging me validates the poet’s imagination and toil. And where a literary artifact successfully achieves the transfer of an emotional or intellectual stimulation from the author to me, I have enriched my life. As long as a poem is able to enhance a man’s or woman’s perception of what it means to be human, the art form proves its worth. Each time I observe the face of a student shine with a radiance not evident before a poem was read and absorbed, my faith in the value of poetry and the teaching of poetry deepens.

The very definition of the art, though, poses problems as well as reasons for instruction in it. I consider poetry to be the most intense possible use of language. Traditional poems employ regular patterns of stress, sound and/or stanza in order to create linguistic intensesness, to call attention to the difference between what the poem wishes to communicate and everyday speech. But the very regularity of these patterns implies predictability, and predictability can lessen the reader’s attention, can detract from intensity.

Regular patterns were largely abandoned by poets early in the twentieth century. Belief in set arrangements and hierarchies in social, religious, scientific and artistic life was crumbling around the poets. And any concept of predictable orderliness in these spheres continued to be challenged as the highly irregular century proceeded.

Yet when poets discard regular templates (whether for metre, rhyme or stanza) the problem of creating intensity increases. Poets have to draw attention to the difference between their discourse and everyday speech without resorting to predictable patterns. Language somehow must work harder than with conventional prose—or else why call what is written poetry?—and the reader’s passage through the words must be slowed down enough that the reader becomes aware of the way language is working. Since the methods of solving the problem have to be unpredictable, however, a second difficulty arises: in effect, the poet invents the art form every time he or she writes. A reader is asked to enter unfamiliar ground each time she or he is invited to read a non-traditional poem.

This double challenge offers the greatest opportunity for poets to generate intensity, even while simultaneously the poem’s fulfillment of this potential may enormously discomfit the intended audience. The strategies chosen to alert the reader that she or he must read the poem differently than prose can include playful, fractured and/or ambiguous use of sense, grammar, spelling, sound. The page can serve as a canvas: indents, typography, and stanza and line breaks may impart meaning visually. Extensive use of metaphors or similes, hyperbole, and image banks that draw on esoteric knowledge are other compositional devices contemporary poets may adopt.

Meanwhile, the experimental nature of many attempts to distinguish this discourse from conventional prose can alienate readers if the *purpose* of adopting a particular compositional technique is not understood, or is deliberately mystified in a defensive gesture on the part of the writer. When poetry is already disliked by the population for reasons discussed above, and then poetry is further cloaked in an aura of difficult access, the combination can only be bad news for the art. The B.C. poet and publisher Howard White describes an Amnesty-International-sponsored encounter between Canadian and foreign writers in Toronto:

At a bull session later some CanLit prof asked why poetry was less marginalized in so many developing countries and about 17 third-worlders tried to answer at once. The general drift was, western poets have done it to themselves because all they do is write for each other. They consider it corruption of true art to write for common taste, but they’re never done whining that the public fails to appreciate them. And even when poets from developing countries show how well the public responds to poets who write for common taste with serious purpose, western writers fail to get the message. Somebody tried to make a case that western writers didn’t have the kind of big social challenges poets in developing worlds did,

but gave up when somebody else yelled, "Try taking your culture back from Hollywood and Madison Avenue!" (10-11)

A variety of approaches to creating an intense use of language are *bound* to produce artistic disagreements, though. Intensity, after all, is not a quality capable of objective measurement. The Chilean poet Nicanor Parra cautions against claims that one specific technique will be the salvation of poetry, or that any such strategy is the only correct one for whatever reason. His poem "Young Poets" is here translated by Miller Williams:

Write as you will
 In whatever style you like
 Too much blood has run under the bridge
 To go on believing
 That only one road is right.

In poetry everything is permitted.

With only this condition, of course:
 You have to improve on the blank page. (143)

I regard the uncertainty swirling around the corpus of contemporary poetry—and, by extension, historical poetries—as a marvellous and unique opportunity for learning. This situation constitutes for me a further justification of poetry's inclusion in our schools. Poetry raises an abundance of questions about linguistic expression, about the purpose and function of art, about the formation of personal judgment, about the skills necessary to form and defend in words an opinion or idea. Revealing the craft of poetry can initiate students into the craft of other artistic media—music, cinema, clay, fibre arts. Issues of marginality and the mainstream, of the role of cultural gatekeepers, of speech and silence are inherent in any study of poetry. Where students are shown poems that successfully enlarge their sense of the world, of the myriad possibilities of human life, of other ways of envisioning the challenge of being human, the art has unquestionably earned its place in any curriculum designed to educate minds rather than merely train them. Indeed, an inquiry into the very basis of much of the educational process—labelling, categorizing—is subsumed by an examination of poetry. How can there be both prose poems and poetic prose? In the latter case, if poetry is writing at its most intense, is the "small dream about time" (140) in Annie Dillard's non-fiction *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*—the riveting sequence where the book's narrator views all the temporal content of the Earth at a single glance (140-43)—not poetry? Or what about the splendidly

evocative image that closes Sid Marty's non-fiction *Men for the Mountains*, where the narrator listens to the shade of legendary Jasper Park warden George Busby?

He leaned forward then and held his gnarled hands out to the firelight, and the flames threw his shadow, magnified, onto the thick logs of the cabin wall. Then he began to weave a tale of high mountains and of proud men that rode among them, like princes surveying their estates, like lords high up in their strongholds, where only the wind could touch them, and where the world was free of pain and sorrow, and we were always young. (270)

If such prose can be termed poetry, what is the purpose of nomenclature? What does it mean to exist at a time when boundaries between the various arts are collapsing, when even some sciences are apparently converging?

In our culture at present, the most widely accepted means of determining value is cash: anything that cannot attract dollars is judged worthless. Yet poetry exists entirely outside the money economy. Almost no book of poetry makes a profit; virtually no poets can live on sales of their art. To continue to honor poetry—to deem the art culturally significant—is to instruct students that some things on this planet have value even if those things cannot be assigned a monetary equivalent. Few people would attend a church that lacked a building, that was so poor the congregation met in the open air. Few sports or games—even among children—are now played without prior purchase of expensive equipment. But poetry insists that there *is* a worth beyond dollars, that some human activities and creations are literally priceless.

Not that poetry lacks a defense even in terms of its usefulness to commerce, to the pursuit of money. For instance communications consultant Cheryl Reimold, in a four-part series published in the magazine of the U.S. Technical Association of the Pulp and Paper Industry, explains why reading poetry would be helpful to business people. In introducing her first article, she urges:

To your regular diet of technical or business material, add a little poetry. Wait, please—don't stop reading this yet! I'm not suggesting this only to offer you the aesthetic and spiritual gifts of poetry. Poetry will help you write better memos, letters, and reports.

Great poetry releases the power in ordinary words and makes them resonate. The poets take all the principles of writing—persuasion, clarity, organization, force—and exploit them to the maximum. In a few words, they can tell the story of the world. To discover the possibilities in language and use it to transmit your message with real clarity and power—you must read poetry. (97)

I locate poetry's merit as a subject for study at considerable remove from Reimold's claim that exposure to some poems will spice up a corporate executive's memos. But I certainly endorse her praise for the best poets: "In a few words, they can tell the story of the world." Whatever small amount most of us know about the Elizabethans or Victorians, we know from poems that have lasted. The mighty armies, fleets, battles, social unrest have faded with the kings, the queens, the wealthy, the desperately poor. Some words were scratched on paper by one particular human, on a Thursday afternoon when a rainstorm seemed imminent and a couple of domestic responsibilities—involving a rip in a coat and a diminished household fuel supply—were being evaded. Improbably, those words are what has endured. The noisy among us today are certain that the sense of our own time we will bequeath to the future will involve movies, television, the latest pop music star. Perhaps. But so far among humanity's achievements, poems have proven among the most effective time travellers.

I believe that when we teach our students affection for poetry, we teach them affection for the human story as it has been, as it is, and as it will be. Which is to say that as we rescue poetry for love, we teach our students love for their own species, and so for themselves. Surely that deserves our best efforts as teachers; surely our profession has no more crucial task.

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