

T. J. Ross

TEACHING POETRY IN THE PROVINCES

“. . . Cram them full of noncombustible data, chock them so damned full of ‘facts’ they feel stuffed . . . ‘brilliant’ with information. Then they’ll feel they’re thinking, they’ll get a sense of motion, without moving . . . Don’t give them any slippery stuff like philosophy or sociology . . . That way lies melancholy . . . Don’t let the torrent of melancholy and drear philosophy drown our world. We depend on you. I don’t think you realize how important you are, we are, to our happy world as it stands now.”—Ray Bradbury, Fahrenheit 451.—

I

One afternoon, when I had finished a lecture on E. M. Forster at a university in the Southwest, a coed paused by my desk to ask, in all stammering earnestness, what I had meant by the inner I-life and the s-s-self. Coming from a senior, and an English major to boot, the query reminded me that the first law of teaching in this country is to take nothing for granted. I was led to consider the easy way one can go on about the Self and the Individual and Integrity from the somewhat creaky security of one’s swivel chair. And I recalled the cautions of friends back East as I prepared to embark on this, my first teaching job: “They lack a certain dimension in personality down there. They’re all boarded up. You’ll find out.” What I was to find out about my particular interlocutor was that in fact she came from New Jersey.

And lo! the other day as I referred in passing, though not so unwittingly, to Hamlet’s *Weltschmerz* (in a Shakespeare course at a university in New Jersey), I was asked to explain what that was. I did so; the students seemed intrigued by the mood defined; and when, at the end of the hour, some came round the desk to check their notes on *Weltschmerz* further, I asked, in my turn, if this weren’t, after all, a stock mood among adolescents. “You’d have to be *awfully* sensitive” I was told; it was agreed that though young people naturally have their “troubles,” they are not nowadays sensitive *like that*. Did this mean that whatever nature Shakespeare was holding up the mirror to in his play, it wasn’t theirs? And since we were reading the most popular play in a canon recognized by all authorities to be the most abundantly representative of the spirit and character of Western culture, where did this leave our class?

Neither of these questions was actually raised, but we all had a sense of them, in the air, controlling the direction of what we did say. Since I had insisted on not doing Hamlet as a “crazy mixed-up” character, nor as one stuck in a single mood, nor as just another dread example of what happens to unrealistic spoiled boys, on whom we could peer down from some “mature” vantage point, we had had instead to stand our ground to the extent of this interesting—and disconcerting—confrontation. In squarely confronting the play’s “strangeness,” we were brought to see that if its strangeness were not ours, that fact did not make us any the less “strange” to behold—a usefully humbling lesson, I hoped, not so much on the matter of perspective (for students are, if anything, overconditioned to relativistic “approaches”) but rather on the prerogatives of art, the past, and the self.

Not that students aren’t usually humble; it’s an unseemly paradox that in our land of super-democracy we so early become super-humble. How some popular brands of “humility” promoted in the schools block people off from what they’ve presumably gone to school to discover will be emphasized in the teaching experience I would like to consider here. I’ve put humility in quotes to suggest a common usage more discreet than accurate. The more telling word is: inhibition.

II

Some years ago, I taught a course in Modern Poetry in the “adult extension program” of a midwestern university. The class consisted mainly of elementary and secondary school teachers, most married, and all female, running in age from eighteen to sixty. Most of the group had degrees from schools of education and were in the course to gain additional credits for better pay. We met once a week in a grade school building located in a town in northern Michigan, where several of the members of the class themselves taught. I mention our meeting place because it was the materials displayed in our classroom which provided an initial eye-opener. Clipped from *Life* and other such educational “tools” and plastered all over the place were photographs of, and detailed news accounts about, Ted Williams, Lana Turner, Lana Turner’s daughter, and the gangster who, some months before, had become celebrated after being slain in the star’s residence. When our class had met a few times, I ventured to ask about this, and was told it was part of the Current Events Program of the children who met there.

“I see. Ted Williams. But what about—”

“This is the coach’s homeroom. He teaches math, too.”

“—Lana Turner—and—”

“He’s a real bug on keeping his class up on Current Events. He brings in things and they bring in things.

Sharing experiences as peers. He’s such a hard worker!

Not the quickest in the world but very serious.”

One can guess whose features have adorned those walls since. Perhaps the most numbing aspect of the school atmosphere lies in the in-

creasing similarity between its emphases and those of the world "outside." Differences between the two grow less as differences in mentality between teachers and television producers become invisible. It's a trend-wind, and the teacher who comes along in its wake will find steering an independent course rather than following lines of least resistance not easy.

We began with Emily Dickinson, and while I was glancing round at the pin-ups, a question about the poet's "morbidity" was raised—a standard opening gambit. I replied that yes, her hundreds of variations on the theme of dying show a morbid preoccupation which, though not the thing those of us busy in our own pursuits would normally be haunted by, is a central concern of the bigger poets, as of more serious clergymen, and so normal for anyone in either of those jobs. The gay brightness with which she asserts, and thereby controls, an inescapable fact of life allows her readers to confront that fact with greater consciousness and interest.

Still, students won't readily grant that such singular morbidities may be worth the candle. Doing a piece like Graham Greene's "The Revolver in the Cupboard" with freshmen, for example, will evoke cries of morbid, sick, mean and again, *not like us*. Well, he may be morbid, I said on one such occasion, but he's worth a million: he has motor boats, a fine family, is a devoted father and husband, and lives high off the hog; if it takes a morbid-powered fuel to get one up there, isn't it worth it? The majority reply without hesitation; no, it is not. Better the straight, narrow, and fairly sure than the speculative and subjective. This stiff-necked humility, or inhibition, as I've called it, is posited on "a fear of the dark," of those goads of self which can't be settled by the slogans of citizenship or pop psychology.

And so in the teaching of any of the arts whose "strength and purpose" as Stuart Hampshire puts it, is to "counterbalance and undermine the increasing burden of social utility and of social order" while restoring ". . . in some vivid form the memory of a private unconsenting self, a lost rebellion," one is continually on the defensive about the nature of one's subject. For many academicians the idea of so defending works which are, of course, their own justification, is outrageous and so they decline the gambit. The result is that their material is attended to as, paradoxically, nothing—but a part of the ordinary game—and then not seriously engaging.

The question inevitably following on "morbidity" has to do with "arrogance." Who do Dickinson (or Greene) think they are, anyway? In certain settings one can rapidly reply that "an understanding of her ironic mode will movingly reveal the 'essential humility' of Dickinson's vision as well as show her to be possessed of an endearingly homespun humor which she subtly injects into her compassionate metaphysic of Good and Evil," which redeems everything. Then everyone sits back in charmed passivity while you explicate levels of meaning like a magician pulling colored silks from a top hat. And after the show, with smiles

and nods, everyone goes home. But this doesn't work too well with students who haven't yet learned that you must not say, "That poem stayed in my mind" but rather, "The skilled reader will be impressed by the symbolic resonance of the architectonic."

So I noted instead Dickinson's emphasis on spiritual power and agreed that she was arrogant. In any case, she goes over well. Granted her morbidness and arrogance, she wrote of books as being the best of "frigates" and mightiest of "prancing coursers"—an all-right attitude for the halls of education. There was also that parson in Philadelphia who seemed to have frustrated her in a way which provided a clear-cut motive for her strange activity; and she showed a due regard for God.

Not so Thomas Hardy who brought forward what, like most of my colleagues, I daintily called "loss of faith." To this, one usually appends some murmurings about an "ensuing crisis." Would the skies cave in, one wonders, if it were revealed that the loss of faith doesn't always entail a severe crisis? For Hardy it was surely more a shucking off than a loss; yet I refrained from observing that the tone of "The Oxen"—the anthology piece regularly used to show off a crisis-inducing discomfiture—is rather smug in its winsomeness.

As we breezed past this, none of us mentioned "atheism"; nor did we stop for any of the large and still pertinent questions Hardy asks about Christianity or for the larger questions they look toward. Critical views of religion are as unadmitted in education as in the other mass media. In the provinces, the mode of "communication" about religion and culture works on the tack of how the good Christians improved, or wiped out, the cruel pagans. Of course, the closest exegesis of Biblical allusions is standard; but even teachers sophisticated in expatiating on their material "in all its complexity" shy away from any other weaves in the complex. The quicker student, on the other hand, is concerned with the leading question most literate people are conscious of: Whether the Christian idea and ideals did not go up irredeemably in the smoke of the murder camps. The total evasion of such questions figures in the widely remarked student cynicism, "apathy," or "silence."

Indeed, if sex was the main Victorian taboo, ours is religion, a taboo which cuts across all brow-lines. A reason for the run on sex in fiction, one sometimes feels, is because it's the safest topic, the one a novelist can open up on without anyone minding. So too students are accustomed to their teachers' wry gags on sex—so long, that is, as Freud isn't referred to. Here we have a further evasion, for despite the amount of Freud-based scholarship in the journals, it is awesome to see how the thought of this "arrogant" figure is by-passed in the classroom.

It is to be expected that along with the lack of intellectual seriousness in the tone of our education, there will be missing too any sense whatever of aesthetic gaminess. Thus, a common complaint among professors of literature is their students' blankness toward irony. There are, of course, reasons for this which reflect on the complainers—like their blankness to any other playful aspects of art than official "modes" of ironism.

III

This granted, it's still curious to observe how unfree students are to respond to the ironic or the gamy. Before we launched into the mainstream, I asked my class to write "cold" on the purpose-achievement-value of a piece they'd not before seen, Auden's "To an Unknown Citizen," which, the reader will recall, sets up rather a clay pigeon:

. . . found by the bureau of statistics to be
 One against whom there was no official complaint,
 And all the reports on his conduct agree
 That, in the modern sense of the old-fashioned word
 he was a saint.
 For in everything he did he served the Greater Community.

and ends:

Was he free? Was he happy? the question is absurd:
 Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.

The middle-aged teacher who'd told me about the Current Events Program wrote as follows:

Here the author is writing about all the good characteristics of a citizen who has passed on. He seems to want to impress us with the citizen's good deeds. The author tries to have us remember nothing amiss about this one . . . He uses the reports of Industry, Psychology workers and others . . .

The poem seems very different to me than Hardy's. His language appears trite.

The last two lines of the poem, make one think that perhaps the author is afraid he has not proved his point up until then. He seems too anxious to be clearly understood.

The following is from a teacher and "active clubwoman":

I feel that the poet's purpose in writing this poem is to show us that we do not need to be wealthy or famous to be happy. A person with an average income is perhaps the happiest . . .

I think there is great value in this poem. Too many people who have a good job, a nice family, and the necessities of life are not happy. This poem should help such people . . .

Another of the teachers found this:

. . . a memorial to the plain every day citizen I liked this poem as well as any we have studied . . . You could tell by this poem that this citizen was interested in country, home, and family and to me these are the things that make any country great.

Another enjoyed the poem because "there isn't any pessimism . . . I know quite a few men who would fit this description. Just doing the average things well . . ." Another teacher concluded:

Matthew Arnold said that poetry deals with idea rather than facts. In "The Unknown Citizen" the facts have served to bring out the idea that the ordinary citizen is free and happy.

Another meditated that "the citizens who are known are those who have done something wrong in Auden's opinion . . . However, I wonder if we should conclude that only wrong is known . . ."

Others got within better range, noting that ". . . Auden's attitude is satirical. He holds up a carbon copy of a man to ridicule," or "I had better get myself out of the shoes of the Unknown Citizen. Auden's language isn't as pretty as Housman's but his verse means more to me." This last was from a farm woman, a sometime reader (though not admirer) of Mickey Spillane, who had no teacher's college training so far. Saltier yet is the following, by a nurse:

The author is evaluating the life of a citizen in an industrial state-controlled country; and showing the evils of such a state . . . the author gets his point across by using a kind of irony such as Hardy uses in *The Ruined Maid*; he uses humor in names and is witty. His closing line is very ironical—the question of whether he was happy or free doesn't ever come up—and again shows complete control of the state. They would have "heard" if he were not.

Few of my students got much beyond a skittishly personal reaction to the conformity-right-or-wrong business and on to the larger reference of the poem which has to do with the change in meaning from saint to "saint" and with the conflict of service to God or Community. Aesthetically conditioned by the mass media, they saw the poem as reassuring, or as detailing a specific "case" to be chewed over and psychologized about; they did not see it as presenting a criticism of general scope, or an idea. In like manner, they failed to note that Dickinson's most innocuous looking verses on books as frigates or locomotives as horses dealt actually with distinctions and grades of power—her favorite subject this side of death. Except for foreign affairs chat, the high and age-old questions of power, desire, conflict are kept muffled in our schools.

IV

A standard way of side-stepping such questions was suggested by the teen-age member of our class. In the most sublime of responses to Auden she found his poem "a wonderful tribute" to the American citizen, and so was perturbed by our subsequent discussion. She'd never heard of irony before; how could I be sure it was there? Besides, she'd been an A student in high school where they'd read lots of literature and loved it. On my asking what they'd read, she mentioned *A Farewell to Arms*. What had they said about the book? Talked about the characters. What about the characters? Well, you could see they were *crazy*. Had I seen the movie version? It brought that out very well; Jennifer Jones acted crazy all the way through, and was wonderful.

This response is clearly one of reflex rather than reflection; and the

problem it raises is as clearly more a matter of native inhibition than of "native intelligence." Even more pervasive is the markedly inhibited tone of the following item, written by a new arrival to affluence, still teaching grade school on the side:

Auden's purpose is to evaluate the citizen without saying anything critical about his character or ways of life. His opinions were of what was going on then, nothing of the past or future.

Which the writer finds commendable. The insistence is on living in the Current.

In the desire not so much to be a part of one's time as to be indistinguishable from it, one holds with passion to the rights of the Current. Any divergences are seen as weird, cute, or incomprehensible; and the two main divergences are craziness and pastness. As a freshman wrote on a theme shown me by a stunned colleague: "Unfortunately, I was not alive when Abe Lincoln was President, so I cannot speak with understanding about him." But means of this "I wasn't there, Jack" slant, one pays one's respects to, while holding at bay, the force of what otherwise might be imposing or discomfiting. The same holds for the most recent "news" as well—for once an event's or person's Currentness has been proclaimed and "explained" by the news media, he (or it) may be shelved as safely Past—and hence a mere matter of lore, and as suited to the attention of the lore-monger as batting averages or stars' lives.

Most writers on the arts assume that one cannot expect, in a mass society, any but a hip few to be seriously responsive to poetry. The irrelevance of this stock idea to the teacher in the liberal arts may need stressing here. Considering the ways in which students stumble over these arts, one must face the fact that the hue and cry about "innate capacity" and "proper background" begs the question—even though, by a pathetic irony, no one is more eager to join in the hue and cry than the undergraduate who hears so much about his lack of "proper background." More to the point now is the observable fact of current inhibitions: the suspiciousness or nervousness of students before such "universal" concerns as death, passion, danger, loneliness, sickness, hunger, luxury, pride, virtue, dream, fate. Which sums up as a curiously inordinate fear of life. In these remarks, I have observed this uniform fear in a few of its symptoms; I offer no catch-all solutions, nor want to.

The sense of student inhibitions may, however, remind us that it is not the teacher's first business to worry about "how the poet himself would read the poem," or how the Graduate School would read the poem, or how his wife reads the poem, but how his students read the poem. His aim, after all, is to get his subject across to them. How much inkling of the stuff gets through to how many will depend, among other factors, on its simply being made accessible. Alas, it is in the classroom, where "approaches" to the "mechanics of reading a poem" are daily rehearsed that the poem is least accessible; where, among Guidebooks and Toolbooks, the language of feeling shared and fed by ages past and passing is lost.