The importance of poetry and the power of the phrase mellifluous

Gerald Noonan

It was all very well for T.S. Eliot to label poetry "a mug's game" since as a prime practitioner he had an insider's perspective upon the motes of the medium; nonetheless, poetry for children is clearly important as a means of fostering a flexibility of language and imagination that has lifelong usefulness on a par, at least, with the effects of any other games the little muggers play.

Ideally, sensitivity to the joy and freshness of language (in reading, writing, and talking) will still be there long after the finer points of motor-coordination and muscle-tone, of aerobics and agility, and the trauma of victory and defeat begin to fade.

More pragmatically, it is necessary that some conception of poetry be instilled in the young — some conception of regular meter and easy rhyme — in order for there to be a norm against which later, freer, and flatter verse might ricochet. Margaret Atwood's opening stanza, for example, "The hole in his throat/ is the same as the black/ holes in space", would lose much of its laconic chill were it not invisibly bouncing off poesy's sunnier, more floribund, underpinnings. W.J. Keith makes a similar point recently, in his *Canadian literature in English* (Longmans, 1985), about the "serious games" that Robert Kroetsch plays "with meaning, form, and language." As Keith says, "Kroetsch depends upon what he denies; his effects rely upon the shock to our sensibilities that would not work without our attachment to realistic conventions and a literary tradition implying continuity."

Perhaps, then, it is a major cause for concern that a thirteen-year-old recently told me, after her reading of Dennis Lee's *Lizzy's lion,* that what she found most interesting was "his [new] idea of using rhyme in poems." I trust that this one incident is not to be explained by the onset of a national trend toward giving children "black-hole-in-the-throat" poetry before they discover doggerel. As it is, I occasionally encounter university students of creative writing who, in effect, are attempting to do a Kroetschian "seed catalogue" or a "two-headed" Atwoodian "politics of poetry" before they acquire any conception of the technical apprenticeship such writers undergo to find the craft that takes so long to conceal.

For children, I suspect that it *is* primarily the matter of technique that needs to be absorbed — and proffered — in conventional increments, not the matter of the content; the ideas in most cases will not register until the child is ready

for them, whereas rhythm and rhyme can remain forever in the head without necessitating any immediate comprehension.

I admit that that last notion stems in part from the odd moment of observation in a faculty lounge, at a sherry party let us say, or at a Legion hall, where veterans of real or literary wars, or of English class memory-work, are apt to quote at the strangest moments from "Flanders Fields" ("To you from failing hands we throw/ The torch"), or Wordsworth ("... trailing clouds of glory do we come") or Rupert Brooke ("And is there honey still for tea"). There's a link from that eclectic data to the experience, surely, of many parents who in soberest mien will, on special occasions — Christmas, Easter, Robbie Burns' day — read aloud a particularly appropriate poem to their assembled children.

Once or twice on Hallowe'en I tried emoting my way through Alfred Noyes' "The Highwayman" (..."came riding, riding, riding/...up to the old inn door") without, as I thought, eliciting a response in my listeners, about ten and eleven they must have been, half as strong as that which was welling up, like a half-cured ham, among my own remembrances of how much *I* used to like it. A couple years later, while the poorest reader of the two and myself were engaged, one evening far from Hallowe'en, in washing post-fiesta dishes, I exclaimed of some abundant and recurring item of dinnerware, "'And still of a winter's night' they come", and what should be waiting there, in the mind of my fellow washer-upper, non-reader though he was, but the rest of it: "When the wind is in the trees/ And the moon is a ghostly galleon, tossed upon cloudy seas..."

The importance of poetry must have a great deal to do with that power it seems to have to reside, even in children (and war veterans) not given to books and reading, close to the pulse, as an immanent sense of the norm.

The question of conveyed meaning, of course, of detailed rational communication, is something else, something that is often, in the uninitiated and in others, distinct from the sound-magic of poetry. Aldous Huxley confesses somewhere in his writing that for years he had been enamoured of a line of verse that contained the word "carminative"; later, when he discovered what the word meant, "relief of flatulence", his reaction was never quite the same. In my own experience, it was those "magic casements" from Keats "opening on the foam/ Of perilous seas in faery lands forlorn" that I, following my teachers I suppose, admired for years as verbal artistry fit to tingle at one's finitudes, without ever knowing that "casements" meant something as backyard banal as "window frames".

"Education by poetry," Robert Frost said, "is education by metaphor." Perhaps poetry also educates us to the power of the mellifluous to fool us.

Frost's main point, in his essay "Education by Poetry: A Meditative Monologue", has more substance and range:

> ...unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at ease with

figurative values: you don't know the metaphor in its strength and its weakness. You don't know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are not safe in science; you are not safe in history.

Although poetry does not chart surefire phases of literacy, or of logic, or even of memory, it does exercise and develop the taste and judgment by which one might, to cite Frost again, "judge an editorial. . . judge a political campaign. . . know when [one is] being fooled by a metaphor, an analogy, a parable" — or by a phrase mellifluous.

Poetry is important because by its metaphor, by the compelling magic of sound, it has the power to instigate experience through language, to both unleash feeling and to preserve it. And if language is essential for the progress of humanity, poetry's importance for children can never be ignored even if it is only subjectively that it can be demonstrated.

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