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## Teaching Poetry

H. B. Furay

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# Teaching Poetry

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H. B. FURAY

**M**OST of us have no expectation of becoming famous teachers but we would like at least to experience the satisfaction which a good craftsman achieves: the continual consciousness of knowing exactly the job to be done and exactly how to wield the tools to do it. This is difficult for the teacher of any subject, since it involves not only a mastery of the subject matter but a mastery of the art of presenting that matter to varying groups; but it is particularly difficult for the teacher of literature. For literature, although in some respects a science, that is, a systematized body of truths, is much more an art, the art of writing; and the study of literature is thus the study of an art, which is a quicksilver sort of thing. You have, then, one art, the art of teaching, the intent of which is to capture and convey another art, the art of writing, literature as we teach it being largely a study of writing, an appreciation of the writing of others (idea and form) and an endeavor on the part of the student to go and do likewise. Art thus laid upon art amounts to double jeopardy, hence the intensified difficulty.

This article proposes to provide some guide ropes for the teacher of literature to help in his becoming a good craftsman. As with the craftsman, this must be done, first, by knowing the job to be done, which is in this case a matter of knowing what the student is to derive from his study of literature; second, by knowing how to do that job, which is in this case a matter of knowing how to handle a written work

in class so that the student's study of it is best pointed toward the end proposed. The two sections of the article will deal, in order, with these two points.

## I

Literature, being an art, is primarily for delight. Several distinguished teachers of literature, among them David Cecil of Oxford in a recent collection of essays, have had to remind us of this. For all of us tend to run off from this main goal and instead deal heavily with such germane matters as the mental and emotional state of the author studied, his picture of the society of his times, the intellectual influences that led to his work and that derived from it. But the first of these is psychology, the second sociology, the last intellectual history. We must attend to them, of course, since some knowledge of these matters is necessary to a complete understanding of any written work; but we must not make them too chief, otherwise we are substituting means for end and not studying literature at all but the particular subjects mentioned.

All very well, but the trouble is with that elusive thing, delight. Teaching delight is easier said than done. You cannot delight for another, as we attempt to do when we try to transfer to the student our taste for a piece of writing, whole and entire. Being an individual person, he must have his own taste of it or he has nothing. Nor can you legislate delight: "Everyone says this is beautiful, so you had better admit that it is or take the consequences." Nor can you teach delight by imitation. I have heard from older men of how deeply impressed they were by a revered teacher who wept copiously whenever he was reading aloud particularly moving passages of poetry, in this case of Homer in the original. I do not question his or their sincerity, but I am dubious about the results. It seems to me that what his students did was approve delight in another without being themselves delighted. All these dosages of delight can assuredly be helpful, if administered without force and in discreet quantity. But their common flaw is that rather than dosages they are salves, for external application only; they do not really get inside the student and that is after all where we have to get.

Delight is a personal possession made up of a happy fusion of intellectual, imaginative and emotional awareness of something fine. We cannot detach and deliver it to another as we can with other personal possessions, those material and wholly exterior, even with parts of our body, as the insane VanGogh unpleasantly did with his ear. But we can — to an extent which will always be partial but should not be left untried for that reason — detach and deliver some of the ways to intellectual, imaginative and emotional awareness which we have discovered for ourselves or have learned from others. The gift of delight becomes, then, the gift of the capacity for delight; the student is to be put into an intellectual, imaginative and emotional posture from which he is able to take delight.

In a paper read, some years back, to a council of university teachers of English, Professor Bonamy Dobrée, then of Leeds, singled out two main ways of doing this. His two ways are emotional response and analysis, and in that order. Speaking as he was to university teachers he was stressing, obviously, approaches specific to the university; an earlier and foundational step, namely, plain-sense understanding, is assumed to have been already taken, in the secondary school. Admittedly this is an optimistic assumption, since secondary schools differ in virtue, and if training in this basic understanding has not been satisfactorily done, we shall have to take time out to do it no matter at what stage we find it wanting. In point of fact it usually needs doing, or re-doing, at the beginning of college, so there will be some mention of ways to it later on. But the other two, the ones he names, are truly proper to college and deserve more attention.

Analysis, which Professor Dobrée puts in second and climactic place, is of course that ability to do adequate critical evaluation about which we hear so much nowadays and toward which practically all college textbooks are pointed. A student who is able to do evaluation *adequately* will have become sensitive to all the meaning and all the emotional nuances of a piece of writing and, besides that, will know the structural limitations and possibilities of the genre he is

treating; and he will have been forced, much against his will, to write, not with scissors, but with his own pen and his own mind. A student who is able to do evaluation *expertly* will have all these skills and more; he will also be able to marshal the resources of philology, of literary history, of secular history and of philosophy. Adequate evaluation is the goal for all but advanced and specialized groups and for this reading sensitivity must be whetted, which will take nearly all the time available. If, in addition, the teacher tries to go deeply into recondite or purely technical matters, he is stealing time from the essential job and likely to leave it half done; and he is, to be frank, putting the part before the course. When we study, for example, the poem or the short story in the general classes of the first and second years of college, we are not, unless we are mad, expecting to produce en masse poets and short story writers but people whose reading awareness and ability to express themselves have been sharpened by a study of poetry and of stories. If they can enjoy a poem or story because they "get" most of it, we have been successful, and that whether or not they know the definitions involved. The more subtle points we can safely leave to the professional writing classes.

This disposes, for us, of the second and difficult point of what sort of analysis we should aim to teach. There remains the first way to literary delight, the way which Professor Dobrée calls "the first thing" — emotional response. Do not, he says, ask the student to 'dispute it like a man' by analysis until we have antecedently brought him to 'feel it like a man'. Unfortunately this is as far as he goes — except to say that the business of emotional response is a very difficult task and that it is our main task and that one of our most important aids towards it is analysis. To question Professor Dobrée is outlandish for an outlander, but if I were not an outlander, I would ask if the last bit of advice does not constitute a firm contradiction of the first.

I do not think that any sort of analysis, which chiefly involves the intellect, is of itself going to bring about emotional response. It has been my experience that a student can be brought to the point where he dissects a piece of writ-

ing with as much easy deftness as that with which an expert bones a fish — and with just about as much emotional involvement. We have, happily or not, reached an era in which Newman's notional assent, or assent to the idea of the truth of something, is smoothly and habitually disassociated from real assent, or assent to the reality of the thing, that is, realization. Another path to emotional response than that of analysis must be sought for.

Yet we cannot exhort to emotional response. A priest, particularly, if at all aware of the breathing beings in front of him when he preaches, must come to know that the "let us" approach seldom works. People are caught emotionally in life only when the persons in the events which transpire somehow stab deep into their own lives and their own selves. No one has to argue to the emotion to be felt for a beloved son or daughter lost out of their time. How can an equivalent engagement be achieved for literature dealing, as it does, with events which are not mine or of mine? Personal experience cannot here serve, but how does the literary facsimile of personal experience come about? It is, I am sure, by imagination and only by imagination.

This does not, of course, lessen the problem, it only specifies it. It does not lessen the problem because, as we are all very much aware, one of the things which is, perhaps not dying, but at least heavily dormant in our young people is literary imagination, both re-creative and creative. They grow up so surrounded by visual media—cinema, television, comic books—that they have no need to visualize a scene, color and shape and sound and "feel", for themselves; it is all done for them, they need only look. It is profitless, and probably impossible, to deplore this shortcoming more loudly than has already been done. We must address ourselves to its repair.

Summarily, the job of the teacher of literature is to awaken the student to delight, which can only be done by sharpening in him the powers that take delight. The first step (speaking always in terms of the student) is basic plain-sense understanding, which, even if it has already been creditably achieved on the secondary-school level, must be con-

tinually re-checked and re-worked. The two steps proper to the college, at least in the general courses of the first two years, are an arousing of emotional response and a stimulation of intellectual perception, steps which are formally different but complementary and to be done, as much as possible, in parallel lines.

In all but the very dead the arousing of emotional response follows, in my view, automatically upon sufficient imaginative engagement. The stimulation of intellectual perception, Professor Dobrée's analysis, is — again, in my view — to be pointed during the lower-division years almost exclusively toward the student's being able to do adequate, not expert, evaluation.

The following section of this article indicates some ways, found variously successful as the group has varied, towards activating the student's natural capacity for each of these operations. The indications given are useless, however, unless they are accepted as indications merely, signposts to stimulation which, of course, each teacher must trim to the reality of his own subject matter and student material. In literature especially, one must not look to apply rigidly custom-fixed formulas, valid *semper et ubique*, but must, flexibly to need, employ an almost infinite variety of pedagogical means which converge by plan upon a common web of ends, the student's intellectual, imaginative and emotional awakening; and after that, if God and the student so choose, his delight.

## II

In handling a piece of writing in class we draw out of, rather than feed into, the student: that will be the focus of this part. Of course, to be ready to search the piece, he must first know what the characteristic functions and purposes of the type being treated are, whether novel, essay, short story, play or poem; and this provision of background information, of "what we are looking for", must be done by straight lecturing. But competent teachers normally have no trouble in amassing, organizing, contracting and finally presenting such information in a way that fits the particular

group. It is how to get the student to see for himself these principles working (always in a unique way) in an individual piece, how to make him aware that the generally characteristic qualities of a type are living a good or bad life in this concrete composition: there's the rub.

I shall indicate here some lines of questioning to be followed and at the same time point out, wherever feasible, which of the two central responses listed earlier is aimed at in each case. I say "lines of questioning" advisedly because it is the student's answers which should be allowed to determine the course the investigation will take; we should go along with his mental quirks and try to iron them out rather than shy away from them. The perpetual "next question", then, will often be one freshly made up, not planned, one calculated to enable the wanderer to see for himself the illogicality or irrelevance of what he has just said. If he can see that, something stands a chance of being healed in him (usually lack of attention) and he may even come up with the right answer or somewhere near it. Of course; if the development gets too wildly off the point, it must be hauled back by re-explanation of what we are trying to get at and a start at it from a new angle. But, generally speaking, the questioner must learn to sit loose to his own line of thought and instead try to guide aright the student's line of thought, peculiar though that may seem to be. Examples of this looseness in questioning and also of the alternate approach when an existing vein seems to be worked out appear in the sample class at the end of the article.

In indicating questioning I shall take poems, mostly quite short ones. This is partly because of restrictions of space and partly because of a prejudice of my own: I believe there is a distinct advantage in going through a piece detail by detail and then putting the details together in a cumulative verification of the opinion pronounced on the whole, and all this within a space of time (one class-hour, say) that does not exceed the young student's notoriously short span of attention. If you take longer pieces, poems or stories, the treatment in detail is liable to extend over days into a week or more and the student is likely to have forgotten, at the end,



details explicitly noted at the outset, so that, no longer having them, he cannot coalesce them into evidence contributing to and supporting a final judgment on the piece in its entirety. Besides, he gets tired of it and so do you.

An additional advantage is that the short poem, given as a memory assignment, can fix in the student's mind in semi-permanent form all the perceived significances that should cling for him, now, to the physical body of the poem. This advantage is reinforced if the teacher insists on a delivery of the memory assignment which shows awareness, in stress and intonation and manipulation of pause, of the meaning values previously studied.

Later, when the detail-to-whole process has been mastered at least inchoatively, longer pieces, both prose and verse, can be studied with more profit. Here the process is reversed; an opinion on the whole, its artistic virtues and faults, is now sought for, the opinion to be supported by the evidence of observed details which the student has collected and interpreted into a unity by himself, following the path of sensitive reading he has been led through by the teacher. Of course a good answer to such a general question as, "Comment on Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*", represents the peak, to be stood upon, if at all (and even then only in tatterdemalion fashion), at the close of a year of careful climbing. He must be prepared for this final dash to the summit by more specific questions about whole pieces, restricted sallies towards general critical pronouncement, such as: "What do you think of the handling of character in this story?", "What do you think of the handling of imagery in this poem?"

A final caution about these opinions on the whole, before we proceed to our proper and more limited business of ways to make the student grasp the details. If adequate evaluation is accepted to be our goal in lower-division college classes, and the proof of its attainment is the student's ability to write a good answer to a general question on a particular piece, then all we should require is a good answer and not some fixed, apodictic and ideally perfect one that will ring

down the ages. When it comes to interpretation and evaluation of this or that piece, there is no one enshrined-in-amber answer; even Critic A (an expert) in America disagrees vigorously with Critic B (also an expert) in England; and both of them will probably be disdained, as Johnson is now, by Critic C of two generations hence. There are only answers that make sense and answers that do not make sense. If Student Juan takes one critical position about a piece and lines up pretty sensible observations from his reading of the piece to support it, he is doing a good job. If Student José, in the same class, takes a different critical position about the same piece and, in his turn, supports it quite well by evidence assembled through an approach from another angle, he is also doing a good job. Although opposed in their views, both students are to be commended for standing on their own feet, not someone else's; and for having made sound if separate sense both deserve good grades. If because their answers do not agree with Cleanth Brooks or William Empson or me I grade them down, I am not being entirely honest.

Now for some instances of questioning designed to stimulate intellectual and imaginative understanding.

A functional knowledge of grammar is essential for plain-sense understanding and, if it is wanting, nothing but direct drill in grammar will make up for the lack. But among those who do have a truly sufficient knowledge of grammar there is often some trouble about having their grammatical knowledge work smoothly for them as they read. For such students a few questions calling attention to how important the habit of proper "hooking up" is for meaning will do much. Take Housman's poem:

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now  
Is hung with bloom along the bough,  
And stands about the woodland ride  
Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now, of my threescore years and ten,  
Twenty will not come again,  
And take from seventy springs a score,  
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom  
Fifty springs are little room,  
About the woodlands I will go  
To see the cherry hung with snow.

Ask, "What is the cherry there in the first line?", the chances are the answer you will get from the majority is a fruit, or even a vegetable (from city boys for whom everything that grows is a vegetable), or — better but not good — a blossom. Make them re-read the line and many will make their own correction. If not, ask what the phrase, "loveliest of trees", modifies and light will probably glimmer. The point is, it is improper attribution or even none at all that is the culprit.

This poem supplies many simple tests of plain-sense understanding. Except for the contextual use of the word "ride", there are no difficulties of vocabulary, so the students cannot resort to that popular escape hatch; if they do not know, it is patently because they habitually slur their relationships of word, phrase and sense. — There is an implied comparison in the second line in the single word, "hung", if they can extract it. — Without actually pointing to the fourth line, ask what the color of the cherry blossom is, and when it blooms. — The mathematics of Stanza Two are astounding, if you ask simply how old the author is; seventy is most favored with fifty a runner-up, and I have even heard one hundred and twenty, although I did not dare ask how this figure was arrived at.—In the last stanza you can often get a lively argument started between the adherents of a comparison for the word, "snow", and those who insist that it means what it says. The answer lies in the total context of the poem and a correct idiomatic interpretation of the "I will go" of line eleven.

The increase of "recognition" vocabulary requires, in the final analysis, wide and habitual reading and constant use of a dictionary. But you can provide some realization of the fact that one can get a good working "sense" of a word from its context. It is no good just asserting this, you have to show the students how. Let us presume that a student

does not know the word "club", and encounters it in a sentence such as this: "He struck him over the head with a *club*, inflicting a gaping wound." Questioning elicits that a *club* is a) something you can hit somebody over the head with, therefore not abstract, but not concrete yet ethereal either; b) something which, when it hits, inflicts a gaping wound, therefore not a washcloth or a feather but something hard; c) probably something which can be held in the hand. Out of all this builds a gathered definition of *club* as a hard instrument with which one strikes, which is accurate enough for the reader's operative purposes. Try it and you will discover that for most concrete objects this method works, although not for abstract ones, at least not as well. But it works only if the teacher, by imposing practice, makes it work.

After words come word-groupings. Here arises the whole thorny question of how to convey the idiom, to which there is no answer except that the instinct for idiom is absorbed only from fairly constant conversation with those who grew up in the language. Reading will help, but will never supplant this. A Filipino friend, highly proficient in English, referred recently to a "milk-run", meaning a simulated operation; but this is a "dry-run", whereas a "milk-run" is an operation done so often it becomes routine and almost automatic. Still, the sense of many idioms, if they are not too esoteric, can be grasped to some extent from the context. Kipling's *Danny Deever* begins:

"What are the bugles blowing for?" said Files-on-Parade.

"To turn you out, to turn you out," the Colour-Sergeant said.

Although everybody in a class knew *turn* and *you* and *out*, hardly anybody knew *turn you out*. Yet it can be effectively gathered from the military context, and most male students have experience of that.

But there are word-groupings which are not idiomatic. If you read any passage aloud, and properly, you discover that you do cluster words together both in saying them and in thinking them. If the clustering is wrong, you have an ex-

plosion of meaning. The first four lines of Whittier's *Barbara Frietchie* read:

Up from the meadows rich with corn,  
Clear in the cool September morn,  
The clustered spires of Frederick stand  
Green-walled by the hills of Maryland.

What is it that is "up"? The spires. How do they get "up"? They stand up. What is it that is "clear"? Again, the spires. But before, panting hard, you get that far, you will have learned, with some amazement, that it is the corn that stands up (which it does but not as stated here) and that it is the morn which is clear, both clear and cool, really a lovely morning, Father. Patient work on such misconceptions as these is, nonetheless, well worth the effort.

Incidentally, this is a fine passage for exercising imagination. Where is Frederick? On a hill. Why do you say that? The spires. Nonsense, the spires are not the town; look at it. — It is in a valley. Reason? Green-walled — if the hills are around it like walls, it is in a valley. What is the characteristic picture of the town, seen from afar? What is the countryside around it like? They have to visualize the scene as a whole in order to answer; otherwise it is done only with agony. In any case I think there is no stage at which we can disdain such exercise of the picture-making power.

Beyond plain-sense understanding we reach intellectual perception, the whole world of linkages of meaning (not words alone, but meaning) and of sensitivity to implication. Frost's *Fire and Ice* is a good one to test several mental facilities at once.

Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire,  
I hold with those who favor fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate,  
To say that for destruction ice

Is also great  
And would suffice.

To what is fire compared in the poem, to what is ice? Now, why is each comparison appropriate? Then, what is the meaning of saying that the world will end in desire or hate? Do you see any casualness in the poem's manner of presenting this very serious meaning, its phraseology, for example? This is subtle but pervasive, from the opening off-handedness of "some say" through the impersonal country-store argumentativeness of "I hold" and the flippant suggestion of a double perishing to (especially) the colloquial ambiguity of "ice is also great" and the massive final understatement, "ice would suffice". The questioning (and it should be done thus) calculated to extract awareness of this tone will have to be heavily larded with parallels of tone-content opposition from areas within which those being taught move more familiarly — "It's as if I should say...". The final question is, what is Frost trying to say by this evidently deliberate ironical contrast between language and subject matter? It is also a good time, if exhaustion has not set in, to pin down, illustrated by this vivid example, what that elusive thing, irony, is, how it works, what it aims at.

You can find out if they are thinking or simply striving to produce automatic answers by offering such an excerpted couplet as this, from Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*:

A robin redbreast in a Cage  
Puts all Heaven in a rage.

Very little information need be supplied — perhaps only that the robin redbreast is a bird. The question: Why does this put Heaven in a rage? The ones who are thinking will probably get somewhere near the idea that any caged wild thing, since it is being confined contrary to the freedom given it by God, is being treated contrary to the divine order of things, an opposition enraging Heaven. If they are not thinking but simply trying to sound brilliant or pious, they will answer either (brilliant) that the redbreast, being red, stands for the devil who, though caged, is irrevocably opposed

to God and so enrages him, or (pious) that the red bird stands for the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Love, who is caged in this parlous world of ours and so "puts all Heaven in a rage". So help me, I am not making it up! If you are handling the piece orally and with some of the rest of the poem available, the surrounding couplets can be shown, although with difficulty, to converge as diverse illustrations of Blake's original vision of the entanglement of all things in one another: "To see a World in a Grain of Sand/And a Heaven in a Wild Flower . . .".

The same thoughtfulness is evoked by many of Emily Dickinson's poems, again with the advantage that her vocabulary is composed of near and familiar words.

Success is counted sweetest  
By those who ne'er succeed.  
To comprehend a nectar  
Requires sorest need.

You might explain that "comprehend" means "fully appreciate" and that a nectar was the fabled drink of the gods, a fine drink therefore, exceeding all local products in sweetness. Now, why is success counted sweetest by those who do not succeed? Again, are lines three and four simply a restatement of lines one and two? Or how do they fit close to these lines? — as a new thought? an illustration? perhaps even a contrast? What we are getting at throughout is meaning and the connections of meaning. The student will find this effort painful, but it is salubrious nonetheless.

Another of Miss Dickinson's poems introduces the student to apprehension of the significance of words, not in themselves alone but in their associations.

Go not near a house of rose,  
The depredation of a breeze  
Or inundation of a dew  
Alarm its walls away...

They might have to look up "depredation" and "inundation", but once that is done, the way is open to discovery of why

these words are unusual where they occur here and what this unusual collocation says about the "house of rose".

Another useful poem is Shelley's well-known "Music, when soft voices die", where the first six lines form three coupleted units.

Music, when soft voices die,  
Vibrates in the memory—  
Odours, when sweet violets sicken,  
Live within the sense they quicken.

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,  
Are heaped for the beloved's bed;  
And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,  
Love itself shall slumber on.

These three units have something in common and yet something divergent. Lay your finger on the common factor and on the divergence. And show how the last two lines ("And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone...") renew the thought already expressed, but on a different plane. (This is, of course, not the language I would use in class, but I am shortcutting.)

In all these we have been principally concerned with meaning, with intellectual perception of the significance of images. But you could go through all the same poems in the manner briefly indicated for the few lines from *Barbara Frietchie*, with the intention of stirring imagination. In every piece of imaginative writing there are never more than a few suggestive details given for a scene. The writer's selection of just those details as key, and vivid enough to hint the rest, is *his* art; the reader's ability to seize those key hints and imaginatively flesh out the scene is *his* art. Let us make our readers practice this their proper art both orally and in writing.

The Elizabethans are perhaps paramount in picture-making, and among them, as in so much else, Shakespeare is first. Donne is also good, but the student must be able to follow the metaphysical close line of imaginative argument



before he undertakes Donne. Shakespeare is often difficult, too, of course. But in his sonnets, at least, the organization often allows the difficulty to be divided and so conquered. "That Time of Year" is typical of many sonnets, where the first twelve lines present three quatrained pictures, each one vivid and rich in suggestion, each one intricate, too, in the close knitting of its imagery (to be unravelled with a loving care for precision), but each one finished in itself, leaving the student free to begin the next untrammelled.

I wish there were space to go into the short story also, but there is not. It is plain, though, that with adaptation to the different form the same procedures of intellectual and imaginative stimulation can be followed unto the making of a mature and perceptive reader.

All this, too, should be supplemented and reinforced by compositions planned in parallel, both those which strive to reproduce techniques observed and those which strive to comment intelligently on them. But that would have to be another paper.

Last of all, and by way of concrete summary, I should like to put down what more or less happened in a somewhat advanced class as we attacked together Archibald MacLeish's poem, *Ars Poetica*, a poem which nobody finds particularly easy, including me. We took the whole poem but, to compress, I shall give only what we did on the first section. This is the poem.

A poem should be palpable and mute  
As a globed fruit

Dumb  
As old medallions to the thumb

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone  
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—

A poem should be wordless  
As the flight of birds

.....

A poem should be motionless in time  
As the moon climbs

Leaving, as the moon releases  
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,  
Memory by memory the mind—

A poem should be motionless in time  
As the moon climbs

.....

A poem should be equal to:  
Not true

For all the history of grief  
An empty doorway and a maple leaf

For love  
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea

A poem should not mean  
But be

The poem has been read aloud by a student, who then has tried to express its total theme, but with more earnestness than precision. We agree that the title, borrowed from Horace, indicates that this is MacLeish's view of what a poem should be and do. We also agree that it is a carefully organized poem, falling into three associated but separate parts, explication of this fact being necessary because our text does not include the dividers which have been reproduced above. Finally, we decide to work now from the beginning to the end, which is the opposite of the tendency thus far displayed, namely, a disposition to interpret by planting the last two lines shakily but resolutely on every other part.

MYSELF. So the first part is the first eight lines. Now, is there unity of thought there?

*Silence*

MYSELF. Well, leaving out the subordinate phrases and clauses, can you give me in a sentence the direct statement of these lines?

STUDENT A. A poem should be palpable and mute, dumb, silent, wordless.

MYSELF. Fine. Now, do you see any common denominator of meaning there?

STUDENT A. Except for palpable, the others are all the same.

MYSELF. Are they all the same? Does everybody agree with that?

STUDENT B. I think that mute and dumb have to do with the lack of ability to talk, while silent and wordless have to do with the fact of not saying anything.

MYSELF (avoiding the tangent). You said, *talk*. Do you think that's a key word here?

STUDENT B. What do you mean?

MYSELF. If you can't talk, are you necessarily mute and silent?

STUDENT B. Of course.

MYSELF. Everybody agree?

STUDENT B (stubbornly, muttering). If you can't talk you *are* silent.

STUDENT C (an enemy of B). You can still make sounds.

STUDENT B. That's not talking.

MYSELF. What is talking, precisely? Making any sound at all?

STUDENT B. Making sound that makes sense.

MYSELF. Can you make sense without forming words?

STUDENT C. You can grunt. (Demonstrates. Applause.)

MYSELF. Supposing, unlike our friend here, you can't grunt eloquently. Supposing you can't make any sound at all? Can you still talk?

STUDENT D. In a metaphorical sense.

MYSELF. Which means?

STUDENT D. Well, you can express yourself otherwise. You can nod your head, you can wave your hands, you can roll your eyes.

MYSELF. Never mind showing us. We are all capable of understanding simple concepts like these. — I think we'd better go now to the first two lines. Does he say a poem is mute?

STUDENT B. It says right here...

MYSELF. Then a poem doesn't say anything at all?

STUDENT C. He says it's mute with qualification. The poem doesn't talk but it still says something.

MYSELF. How?

STUDENT C. It's palpable. It's sensible. It appeals to the senses.

MYSELF. Is that precisely what palpable means?

STUDENT A. The sense of touch. It's tangible.

MYSELF. Now I say that the poet contradicts himself in these lines. A poem doesn't talk, but it does.

*Silence.*

MYSELF. Are you there?

STUDENT D (loftily). Fairly obvious, Father. A paradox.

MYSELF (humbly). Thank you, thank you. Would you care to explain further?

STUDENT D. An apparent contradiction.

MYSELF (abandoning humility). Kindly do not make me use red-hot pincers to extort a full answer. Why is the contradiction only apparent?

STUDENT D. Well, a poem doesn't talk in one way but it does in another. (Shows signs of subsiding but is prodded on by a glare.) It expresses itself by an appeal to the senses.

MYSELF. Then what kind of talk does he exclude from a poem?

STUDENT A (hesitantly). Saying what you want to say in so many words?

MYSELF. And what's the ordinary term for that?

STUDENT C. Explicit. You don't explain.

MYSELF. So a poem doesn't explain but it appeals to the senses. How?

STUDENT E (the class wit, self-elected). As a globed fruit.

MYSELF. You can't cut out the center of a piece of paper and insert a globed fruit, you know. (This is dangerous, as they are likely to do just that and present it to me next class.) At least it's not the ordinary way. What is the way you present a globed fruit in a poem?

STUDENT E. By imagery, of course. (His "of courses" will be his death one day, probably soon.)

MYSELF (grittily). How can I ever thank you? — Now the next two lines. Do they say the same thing?

*Pause while they read it over.* Then CHORUS. Yes.

MYSELF. Then why does he say them?

STUDENT C (infected by E). To fill out the poem?

MYSELF. Come, come, stop being childish. Are these lines purely and simply a paraphrase of the first two? Or do they add something?

*Silence.*

MYSELF. All right, what are medallions?

STUDENT B. Medals.

MYSELF. Any medals at all? Or is there something particular about them?

*Silence.*

MYSELF. Look, do the medallions speak to the thumb?

STUDENT A. They're dumb to the thumb.

STUDENT C (catching on). No, they're dumb to the thumb like in the first two lines. They don't speak in words, but they speak.

MYSELF. How?

STUDENT C. I suppose the picture on the medal is raised, you can feel it. (Discovers he has the answer.) It appeals to the sense of touch.

MYSELF. All right, but that's the same as lines one and two, isn't it? Anything else here?

*Silence.*

MYSELF. Well, why *old* medallions?

STUDENT E (awakening). Things get dumber as they get older. (General laughter. This doesn't have to make sense, since it's a class convention that any remark about the ravages of time is uproarious because it refers to the advancing age of the professor.)

MYSELF (tartly). You not only make your point, you illustrate it. (Louder laughter. After all, I *am* the professor.) However, is an old medallion in any way dumber than a young medallion in the way it speaks to the senses? (Pause.) Remember, it speaks to the senses by its raised surface being felt.

STUDENT A. I suppose the surfaces get worn down. They can't be felt as sharply.

MYSELF. And how would you apply that to the imagery in which a poem speaks?

STUDENT A (waving his hands, feeling his way). Not sharp. Dull. Soft. (weakly) I don't know.

STUDENT C. Could it mean that the sense appeal is soft, that is, gradual?

MYSELF. Well, perhaps that. But that would mean progressive, wouldn't it? Do you think his point here is that the image should be revealed piece by piece? Or is he qualifying the image more generally?—How do you present an image softly?

STUDENT C. Gradually.

STUDENT D. Not too obviously. Even the image should be muted. Not too explicit. It has to be subtle.

MYSELF. Well, probably both. But then he has added a point, hasn't he? — I humbly suggest that each successive two lines adds a slight modification to the original thought, so the poet is steadily enriching it. Anybody disagree? (Nobody does. I didn't expect them to.) If that is so, what about the next two lines? Presuming you know all the words, what is the picture?

STUDENT D. A castle. Stone window sills. Stone... (peters out)

MYSELF. Are they silent?

STUDENT D. Sure. Stones *are* silent.

MYSELF. Well, where's the modification of the original thought, then? Where's the operative word or words giving the modification, as *old* did in the previous two lines?

STUDENT A. Sleeve-worn?

MYSELF. Develop it a little.

STUDENT A. The stone window sill is worn by sleeves.

MYSELF. Amazing, the fertility of your imagination. Why, do you suppose, is it worn by sleeves?

STUDENT B. Maybe they used sleeves for cleaning the sill. It's been cleaned so many times it's worn down.

STUDENT D. Could it be from leaning on it?

MYSELF. I think so. But why would anybody be leaning on it?

STUDENT E (who is also a romantic). There's this princess who is locked in the tower and she leans over to speak to her lover who is below. Years and years go by...

MYSELF. Never mind. We can't afford the years. Is there any other reason for leaning on the stone, probably inconceivable to you people at your age?

STUDENT A. To look at the view. To see what's going on.

MYSELF. So what is the stone speaking about?

*Silence.*

MYSELF. Look, is there anything inside the sleeves or are they just empty sleeves leaning on the ledge by themselves?

STUDENT C. Oh. Men. The stone speaks of the life of men.

MYSELF. When did all this happen? Yesterday?

STUDENT C. It doesn't say.

MYSELF. It does so say. Look again.

STUDENT C. Where, Father?

MYSELF. By golly, where does moss grow? Anywhere at all?

STUDENT E. On surfaces.

MYSELF. Sorry. Phrased my question badly. Will moss grow on any surface at all?

STUDENT C (stage whisper). It will on E's books. (Grins. Indignation.)



MYSELF. All right, C, that's the point. What's your implication there?

STUDENT C (ashamed). I was only joking.

MYSELF. I want you to look at the point of your joke. What is it?

STUDENT C (feeling he's got into deep waters). Because he doesn't use his books.

MYSELF. Fine. Now where does moss grow?

STUDENT A. On things that are not in constant use. Not being handled.

MYSELF. So when did E's princess, wearing sleeves, look out to watch the horses go by? Yesterday?

STUDENT C. Oh, I see. A long time ago.

MYSELF. So what is added by these lines to the speaking that, according to the author, the imagery should do?

STUDENT D (who has a satchelful of quotations). The image should speak of "old, unhappy, far-off things and battles long ago".

STUDENT A. It should re-create lost worlds.

MYSELF. Good enough. Now, to cut it short, I suggest that the last two lines are a re-capitulation. What does that mean?

STUDENT C. It sums it all up.

MYSELF. How?

STUDENT C. It sums it all up in an image.

MYSELF. Why a flight of birds? Is there any evidence that birds flying have been particularly eloquent to poets? I think of Yeats's *Wild Swans at Coole*.

STUDENT C. Never heard of it.

STUDENT D. *The Windhover*. (We have just taken this in class.)

STUDENT A. Shelley's *Skylark*.

MYSELF. You can multiply evidence, it's a favorite subject. Now, is a flight of birds wordless, really? Or is it wordless only in the fairly rich sense specified?

STUDENT D. This one. The last you said.

MYSELF. Would the meaning of the last two lines be different if they had been placed at the very beginning of the poem?

STUDENT C. Yes. If I may say so, Father, "they enjoy the accumulated overtones of all that precedes".

MYSELF. What verbose nonsense!

STUDENT C. I'm quoting you. You were the one said it, about another poem.

MYSELF. Did I, indeed?... Rather well put. — Now, would anybody care to sum up, contrary to MacLeish's desire, the burden of these eight lines?

STUDENT D (This is done slowly and with many references to the book.) A poem should not speak explicitly but only through images. / The images should be subtle and gradual. / The images should have the power of making whole worlds live again for the reader. / A flight of birds is such an image.

MYSELF. Now why did I say that such a summary is contrary to MacLeish's desire?

STUDENT A. Because it's explicit.

MYSELF. The way MacLeish puts it in these eight lines, does he not only express his point but exemplify it?

STUDENT C (who has been looking ahead). "A poem should not mean / But be." The whole meaning is in the being.

MYSELF. And the being is?

STUDENT C. Imagery.

STUDENT E (proudly). A rose is a rose is a rose.

MYSELF. Someday I'll make you explain that. Anybody else have a contribution?

STUDENT B (the class philosopher; he has for some time been sitting hunched in uffish thought). I have rather a different explanation of the whole section, Father. You see, I take the fruit and the medallions and the stone and the birds to be all symbols. Now the fruit...

MYSELF. Fine. Write it out and turn it in before class tomorrow.

STUDENT B (winningly). It won't take long to explain it.

MYSELF. We haven't got long. The bell is about to ring.

STUDENT B. But I...

*The Bell Rings.*