

The Fame and Nurture of Poetry

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I

Annie Proulx, who is incapable of writing an imperfect sentence and whose prose is more genuinely poetic than much that passes for ‘poetry’ today, reflects in her latest book, *Bird Cloud*, that ‘sometimes I don’t know what poetry is’. She will ‘stumble into and around poetry, frequently knocked sideways’ by it. But she certainly recognises it when it is genuine, citing a poem ‘I liked so much I almost fell over’. Real poems, for Proulx, have a kind of physical force and impact, being possessed of the ‘Thing Which Cannot Be Explained’.¹

Over the centuries, the onus has fallen on literary critics to identify and explain that ‘Thing’ and they have mightily disagreed with one another about it, in the process. One of the most famous attempts, in the twentieth century, was that of A.E. Housman, a formidable classical scholar, Kennedy Professor of Latin at Cambridge, and himself a poet, who delivered The Leslie Stephen Lecture at Cambridge on 9 May, 1933 on the subject, ‘The Name and Nature of Poetry’. It is an idiosyncratic performance, with several arresting observations and some frank concluding reflections on his own composition of poems, written usually when ‘I was rather out of health, and the experience, though pleasurable, was generally agitating and exhausting’.²

Having been asked to give a definition of poetry, Housman recalled that

¹ *Bird Cloud* (Scribner: New York, 2011), pp.67–69.

² symmachus.wordpress.com/2008/11/03/a-e-housman-the-name-and-nature-of-poetry (accessed 11 April, 2011). All references to the lecture are to this text.

I replied that I could no more define poetry than a terrier can define a rat, but that I thought we both recognised the object by the symptoms which it provokes in us.

Then, he declares that ‘poetry is not the thing said but a way of saying it’ and that ‘meaning is of the intellect, poetry is not’. This last statement is closest to the main thesis of the lecture: that poetry is as indefinable as the appeal to our emotions which it makes. To the extent to which we seek to interpret it in terms of meaning or intellectual content or, worse, approach it with the idea that poets write it with the appeal to those ends in mind, it ceases to be poetry (even if it is cast in recognisably poetic forms and uses what might be described as poetic diction). The reader turning to it for these kinds of satisfactions is finding elements in it that are perfectly legitimate, but not the essence of poetry. Housman gives, as an example, devout ladies who admire John Keble’s poems in his collection *The Christian Year* because of the Christianity, not the quality of the verse.

In the course of the historical conspectus that provides the framework for the lecture, Housman (echoing Samuel Johnson) rejects the Metaphysical poetry of the seventeenth century because of its dependence on wit, which is not only ‘purely intellectual’ but – worse – ‘intellectually frivolous’:

Their object was to startle by novelty and amuse by ingenuity
a public whose one wish was to be so startled and amused.

That Housman is writing this a decade after T.S. Eliot’s essay, ‘The Metaphysical Poets’ (1921), which was a review of Herbert Grierson’s edition of John Donne and his school, suggests either that he was unaware of the new interest that was stirring in the Metaphysicals (and as Housman was aged seventy-four when he delivered the lecture, such immunity to avant-garde movements is understandable), or that he may have been only too well aware of it and was determined to register his disapproval. Grierson’s scholarship and Eliot’s advocacy had yet to make their formidable impact on poetry appreciation at large, in school and university study of English Literature, yet Housman expressed admiration for Eliot’s poetry.³ This was certainly to change in subsequent decades and because of

³ Richard Perceval Graves, *A.E. Housman: The Scholar-Poet* (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1979), p.232.

this, in retrospect, Housman's critique at this point in the essay sounds very old-fashioned. For him, such pleasure as is to be derived from Richard Crashaw's representation (in 'The Weeper') of Mary Magdalene's eyes as 'two walking baths' – whatever that pleasure may be – is 'not a poetic pleasure ... poetry, as a label for this particular commodity, is not appropriate'.⁴

Moving to the long eighteenth century (from Milton's *Samson Agonistes* in 1671 – usually assumed to be that poet's last poem – to Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798), Housman dismisses it as an age of 'sham poetry'. He can admire the perfection of Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, but the problem – as with Metaphysical wit – is the prevalence of 'intelligence'. It is Matthew Arnold's literary criticism and history that comes to mind now, and Housman endorses Arnold's assessment that the domination of the intellect in the Age of Reason led to 'some repressing and silencing of poetry'.

Not that Housman is an Arnoldian *tout court*. There is no idea at all in his lecture that poetry is a species of religion-substitute or even 'a criticism of life'.⁵ While the influence of Arnold's essay, 'The Study of Poetry' (1880), can be discerned in Housman's reflections and procedure, the elder critic's most memorable declaration there – 'most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry'⁶ – does not inform it.

Instead, when Housman does move from what poetry is not, to affirm what it is, he describes its purpose thus:

To transfuse emotion – not to transmit thought but to set up in the reader's sense a vibration corresponding to what was felt by the writer.

This is 'the peculiar function of poetry', he declares, and he discovers 'the seat of this sensation' in 'the pit of the stomach'. Poems may contain other ingredients which their readers will admire, and, Housman argues, it is

⁴ Just five years before Housman's lecture, Eliot had published an appreciation of Crashaw in *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928), although with a somewhat minimising title: 'A Note on Richard Crashaw'.

⁵ 'Joubert' [1864], *Essays in Criticism* (Dent, London, 1964), p.180.

⁶ *Great Books Online*: www.bartleby.com/28/5.html (accessed 20 April, 2011).

often these that readers (incapable of analysing their ‘sensations’) really appreciate ‘when they think they are admiring poetry’.

On this theory, language can be poetic even when it says nothing in particular at all. Some of Shakespeare’s loveliest verse, Housman argues, is of this kind, as in the lyric ‘Take O take those lips away’ (from *Measure for Measure*). Other songs by Shakespeare, which say something – such as ‘O mistress mine’ (from *Twelfth Night*) – are ‘greater and more moving poems, but I hardly know how to call them more poetical’.

Amongst the sources of Housman’s ideas would appear to be the *fin-de-siècle* Decadents’ rebuttal of Victorian moralism and, more positively, the Paterian emphasis on a heightened, passionate response to an artefact:

the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art’s sake ... for art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake.⁷

What is crucial is that Housman finds the connection, achieved by transfused emotion, between poet and reader, in a beauty of elevated poetic language-use (as in ‘Take O take those lips away’). He identifies it in abundant quotation (similar to Arnold’s ‘touchstone’ method), discriminating between poems which achieve it and those that fail (usually because they are ‘intellectual’). Metre and its rhythmical implications and variations are part of the process.⁸ The emotion thus transfused stirs a fellow-feeling between poet and reader which (as Housman describes it elsewhere) will ‘harmonise the sadness of the universe’.⁹ In ‘Dover Beach’, Matthew Arnold, in a similarly musical phrase, refers to ‘the eternal note of sadness’ in the human condition, but the consolation which he offers is different from Housman’s. In that honeymoon poem, Arnold exclaims to his wife as his reader overhears him: ‘Ah, love, let us be true to one

⁷ Walter Pater, ‘Conclusion’ to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* [1873] In Jennifer Uglow (ed). *Walter Pater: Essays on Literature and Art* (Dent: London, 1973), p.41.

⁸ In Housman’s first footnote, there is detailed discussion of metre and its musical characteristics.

⁹ This, Housman claimed, in a letter to his sister, was ‘the essential business of poetry... [which] is somehow more sustaining and healing than prose’. In *The Letters of A.E. Housman*, ed. Henry Maas (Hart-Davis: London, 1971), p.141.

another!¹⁰ In the face of universal melancholy, that is to say, Arnold provides the remedy of romantic love.

This had not been available to Housman. The bitter disappointments of his homoerotic existence are expressed in various poems (too obviously, perhaps, in a lyric such as ‘Oh Who Is That Young Sinner’). His fictional-poetic lad from mostly rural Shropshire (which he had not even visited prior to writing the poetry about it) provides an idealised subject, discovered and constructed in the world of male agricultural labour, in a way familiar in highly educated, middle- and upper-class Victorian homosexual poets’ works.¹¹ In Housman’s case, the fictional lad was poetic consolation for the factual but physically unattainable, resolutely heterosexual Moses Jackson, with whom he was an undergraduate at Oxford, addressed in these lines from *More Poems*:

Because I liked you better
Than suits a man to say,
It irked you, and I promised
To throw the thought away.¹²

Through his poetry, however, Housman could establish that non-specific emotional connection between poet and reader (and, indeed, in his own reading of other poets, could experience a connection with their emotions) of which, in life, he was perpetually disappointed in terms of an *amitié particulière*. Moreover, for a homosexual in Housman’s generation, this poetic transfusion had (of course) none of the social stigma and legal prohibition of the precise emotional and sexual fulfilment for which he yearned. For Housman, poetry was not so much a criticism of life, as a compensation for it – certainly, for its emotional disappointments – and the

¹⁰ *Arnold: Poetical Works*, eds C.B. Tinker and H.F. Lowry (Oxford University Press: London, 1950), p.211.

¹¹ Gerard Manley Hopkins is the most obvious example, with such works as his poem about Felix Randal, the farrier, and ‘Harry Ploughman’, where the muscular subject’s very name expresses his elemental contact with the soil. Any lingering doubt about Hopkins’ homosexual orientation has been dispelled in Paul Mariani’s recent, authoritative biography where, in diary entries, Hopkins refers to feeling an erotic charge in drawing a male figure and regarding one of his handsome male friends (*Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Life*, Viking: New York, 2008, p.53).

¹² A.E. Housman, *The Collected Poems* (Jonathan Cape: London, 1967), p.127. All references to Housman’s poems are to this edition.

substitute gratification it provided was through its beauty of emotional expression.

Housman's reference to the 'symptoms' which others' poetry stirs and his testimony that he usually wrote his own when 'out of health' are not allusions to physical states alone, or even importantly so. In the following paragraph he refers to his habit of 'having drunk a pint of beer at luncheon' to give 'a sedative to the brain' from his morning's scholarly work on classical texts and to free his sensibility for the inspiration of poetry. Bodily circumstances are combined with mental and psychological conditions. Establishing intercourse (the transfused 'vibration') with the reader, poetry brought harmony, if not resolution, to life's sadness as both poet and reader experienced it.

Technique is as important in achieving this in poetry as tonality, modulation and tempi are for the composer in music and there is much that is musical in Housman's writing. His poetry shares this lyrical quality with George Herbert's in *The Temple*, as well as the characteristic that its lyricism is apparently so effortless, even artless, yet on close examination is revealed as a carefully polished contrivance of naturalness. There is another similarity too: Herbert, in bequeathing his poems on his deathbed to his friend, Nicholas Ferrar, hoped that they might 'turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul'.¹³ Housman was well acquainted with dejection and poetry's ability to alleviate it, although he would have had no time for the definite religious consolations that Herbert proposes in his exquisite lyrics, in their theological dimension.

Housman practised what he preached. A combination of poetic effects, of rhythm and rhyme, alliteration, consistency of imagery devoid of indulgent elaboration, *netteté* of phrasing in which nothing superfluous is admitted but a sense of completeness in each utterance is evident are exemplified in one of his justly best-known poems from *A Shropshire Lad*:

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

¹³ www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/George_Herbert (accessed 3 June, 2011).

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.

The sumptuousness of the opening word sets the positive tone for the first stanza: we linger over and savour its polysyllabic richness. The lushness of the repeated 'l', enclosing the generosity of the initial vowel sound, could not be more inviting. The vibration, then, is set in masterful motion as the line is impelled along in its iambic sequence with a series of sharp consonants (the 'st' of 'Loveliest' is caught up in the stressed 'trees'), as Housman knows not to linger indulgently in that initial, inviting luxury.

The enjambment of the first and second lines perfectly enacts the hanging of the blooming cherry on (as we would say) the bough, although his 'along' is the better preposition, as the line, too – devoted to that lengthening – further imitates nature's abundance. In contrasting stasis, in the third line, where the emphasis falls on 'stands', Housman varies the flowing openness of the first word and entire second line, with a firmness of sound and insistence of rhythmic emphasis that gives the vibration an agreeable variation and the fixity of an image assuredly experienced. The closing line, with its anthropomorphic sense of the catechumen's alb, is celebratory of new life, with a religious subtext of rebirth and purity.

This religious idea is pursued in the second stanza with the reference to the biblical span of a man's life, but the antithetical emotion of regret now dominates as the speaker registers the human being's sense not of endless renewal but of time passing to (and restricted by) mortality. There has been a key change to a melancholy mode in the tone of the poem and, thereby, in the emotion transfused to the reader. Ironically, in the reference to 'springs', Housman uses a substantive which has an energetic verbal equivalent – signifying springing into new life – in the context of registering his sense of life's finiteness and inevitable waning. The effect is given consummate expression in the enumeration of the wearying 'seventy' springs, where abundance conveys a kind of arithmetical tedium rather than

the spirit of generosity found in the opening stanza. Plurality can diminish, as here. The alliteration of 'seventy springs' leads to the final cruel touch in this stanza as the calculation of the twenty-year-old brings the inevitable deduction: 'It only leaves me fifty more'. The open vowel of 'only' conveys the sense of onerousness touched with anxiety.

The repeated numbering is the essence of the transfusion of emotion here and in the final stanza: 'Fifty springs are little room'. When a poet of this skill repeats a word we take particular notice. That repetition of 'fifty' years affirms at large what is experienced in small in one year's change of season from spring to winter (emphasised starkly at this point in the elimination of the mediating summer and autumn). Resignation dominates the final lines as Housman diminishes fifty even further (validating his use of the number a second time, as he interprets it – surprisingly – not as largesse but meanness: 'little room') and he leaves the blossom-laden cherry for its snowbound wintry incarnation (another, sobering kind of whiteness). The emotion is complicated at the end by the argument of the last stanza that beauty requires a larger time than the span of a man's life for its full comprehension, and the concomitant realisation that it is more suitable, at least for this speaker, to focus his attention on the end of things, rather than their promise of new beginnings.

That thought is arresting and contentious, but is subordinate to the emotions of the work which are transfused through its lyrical assurance: a sense of shared joy, followed by a sadness mixed with stoic resignation in the face of mutability and mortality. These are now being maturely understood by a speaker on the brink, at twenty, of adulthood.

II

Housman's lecture – which enjoyed great popularity, was reviewed favourably by Eliot in the *Criterion* and denounced by F.R. Leavis in *Scrutiny*¹⁴ – and his poetry at large provide interesting examples of how the appreciation of the nature of poetry and its nurturing have been and might still be undertaken. No-one would claim that Housman's is the only approach, or that his kind of poetry – lyrical verse – is necessarily the best sort to be enjoyed. But there is no question that the name and fame of poetry have been under active threat or at best regarded with indifference

¹⁴ Richard Perceval Graves, op. cit., pp.255, 257.

for too long, even in those very places where one might have imagined that their reputation and nurturing would have been safeguarded – in school English curricula and university English Departments. Schoolteachers of English are heard to say that they ‘don’t like’ poetry (and, no doubt, say so to their students) and, because of sufficient syllabus flexibility, they can avoid teaching very much of it.¹⁵ In some Australian states, such as Victoria, it is possible, at matriculation, to have taken the highest level of English study and have sidestepped poetry entirely in that senior year. Graduates in English Literature from even the more conservative university departments have lacunae in their knowledge of poetry and its history that once would have been unthinkable (no Chaucer or Milton, for example), and which are indefensible if one holds that, at the very least, an Honours graduate in a discipline should have some acquaintance with its key elements and its historical development. This idea (of an evolving canon of books – never cast in iron, in spite of what its critics routinely, tiresomely claim, but with some inevitable, recurring texts) was abandoned at least a generation ago, and it is poetry in particular which has suffered. In contemporary Australia, an additional bias against British poetry has added to this problem, with such poetry as is prescribed often being preferred merely because it is Australian. Understanding the reasons for the decline in poetry reading and appreciation is part of the process of addressing it.

The formal classroom study of poetry, while customarily sniffed at (especially by poets themselves), must be an important component of a reading culture which, more broadly, would revive, sustain and extend the appreciation of it. The centre has to be held somewhere and experts need to be trained in the teaching of verse, which depends for its success at least as much upon a love of poetry, as on well-developed skills in accounting for and communicating the language of poetic diction, poetry’s various techniques and its history.

One reason for the poor regard in which poetry is generally held today is undoubtedly the now-pervasive reputation that it has for being difficult to read and understand, and – therefore – to teach. Philip Larkin contended

¹⁵ About twenty years ago, I met a prospective highschool English teacher who was finishing her studies and already doing some teaching stints in schools. She proudly declared that, not liking poetry, she had been able, by a careful negotiation of her choice of courses, to avoid studying poetry almost entirely during her undergraduate years in which she was (nonetheless) majoring in English Literature.

that this was the result of the wilful complexity of the early twentieth-century Modernists:

It is as obvious as it is strenuously denied that in this century English poetry went off on a loop-line that took it away from the general reader. Several factors caused it. One was the aberration of modernism, that blighted all the arts. One was the emergence of English literature as an academic subject, and the consequent demand for a kind of poetry that needed elucidation. One, I am afraid, was the culture-mongering activities of the Americans Eliot and Pound. In any case, the strong connection between poetry and the reading public that had been forged by Kipling, Housman, Brooke and *Omar Khayyam* was destroyed as a result.¹⁶

But there was much difficult poetry in English before the Modernists' advent – a Shakespearian sonnet has a rich, multi-layered complexity; what would the 'general reader' have made of *The Dunciad*? And Larkin and other 'Movement' poets, reacting against the Modernists, are far from innocent of abstruse and elusive meaning in their own verse. Further, as we have seen, once we start probing even the apparently straightforward lyricism of a Housman (commended by Larkin) there is a subtle finessing of meaning beneath the superficial simplicity.

Yet there is no doubt that, in academic study of it, a predominance of apparently inaccessible poetry and, what is even more damaging, equally (if not more) obscure interpretations of it by literary scholars – supposedly elucidating it, but making it seem even less accessible – are largely responsible for poetry's bad name today. Particularly as the twentieth century unfolded and as pupils stayed at school longer and, so, encountered this approach to poetry in their senior years' compulsory English classes, the sense developed that poetry, like differential calculus, was a kind of specially challenging brainteaser, the successful unravelling of which in the examination hall (a late teenage *rite de passage*) brought its undoubted rewards for matriculation purposes and then could be blessedly left behind – forever.

¹⁶ 'It Could Only Happen in England' [an introduction to an edition of John Betjeman's poems, 1971], *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955–1982* (Faber and Faber: London, 1983), pp.216–17.

This quarantining of poetry for exercises of practical criticism and interpretation (and the more complex it was, the better it was suited for this and for testing of students' abilities in close reading), while fictional and dramatic texts tended to be treated more in thematic terms (and now, of course, are as often as not set for study in combination with their cinematic versions, making them even more attractive and teachable), further emphasised poetry's unapproachable, exclusively linguistic, arcane character. That poetry has a unique power to plumb the heights and depths of human experience in a rich inventiveness and concentration of language appropriate to such a serious, even solemn enterprise does not especially commend it anymore, either. Susan Sontag observed, as the twentieth century drew to its close, that

taste has become so debauched in the thirty years I've been writing that now simply to defend the idea of seriousness has become an adversarial act. Just to be serious or to care about things in an ardent, disinterested way is becoming incomprehensible to most people.¹⁷

No-one would argue that epic and profound conceptions of character and life are not to be found in the novel or drama, and in abundance. But language, variously configured, in poetic texts seems over-pitched, too ornate or too intricately configured in an unceremonious, unrheterical and unromantic world, and its complex, elusive and allusive subtlety of suggestion rather than plain statement frustrates the mind of a civilisation that prefers (or is only equipped to comprehend) the frankly obvious. Yet to be deprived of the 'transfused emotion' of such as a Housman lyric is surely a diminishing of literary – and humane – experience.

Even undoubted lovers of literature bring apprehensive attitudes to their reading of poetry today. The Sydney bookseller, David Gaunt, in his most recent column in the Gleebooks *Gleaner* states that if he had more time he would have a steady diet 'of the classics reread, plus knuckle down to some poetry'.¹⁸ Something you 'knuckle down to' is something difficult which, usually, you have been avoiding but feel, often grudgingly, that you are obliged to tackle (as an amateur pianist might front up to the more

¹⁷ Interview, 'Susan Sontag, The Art of Fiction No.143', by Edward Hirsch, *The Paris Review*, Winter 1995: www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1505/the-art-of-fiction-no-143-susan-sontag (accessed 27 May, 2011).

¹⁸ 'David's June Reading', *Gleebooks' Gleaner*, Vol.18 No.5, June 2011, p.2.

difficult Beethoven sonatas). The pleasure of poetry reading seems to have escaped even this committed and intelligent reader – certainly, as his initial motivation.

Different from these causes but probably more fundamental to the problem is the decline in the earliest years of family life and schooling in the learning and loving of anything linguistic by heart, but especially poetry, which is essentially an oral art. Obviously, this is related to the demise of our reading culture in general, but especially of careful reading and of savouring and cherishing repeated readings. Before young people have been caught up, in their later teenage years, in the need to be syllabus-focused for such as the Higher School Certificate in New South Wales (where poetry does have a place in the Year 12 English syllabus, but mostly in unsatisfactory configurations in various modules which require it to be read in conformity with certain clichéd life experiences – change, the journey and so on) they need to be introduced to its unique power to take root, through rhythm and rhyme, and striking vocabulary and imagery, in their receptive and retentive young minds. It needs to have come alive and to have spoken to them on its own terms, and this must be sustained as they mature, before they are required to dissect it and apply it to this or that Procrustean bed of interpretation and with reference to other, non-poetic texts.

A poem such as ‘Loveliest of trees, the cherry now...’ has its own integrity of technique and meaning, which needs no further justification, and its rhyming and rhythmical patterns make it delightful to savour.

III

The proposed new National Curriculum for Australian schools, in its draft documents for the study of English, presents a generally grim prospect for the reading and study of poetry in our era of poetry’s eclipse. As it envisages a child’s school years, from the ages of five to eighteen, poetry is mentioned occasionally, but more often it is gathered up under the rubric ‘Texts’, and, sometimes, simply omitted (possibly, deliberately excluded):

The term ‘text’ refers to written, spoken or multimodal material. Texts are structured in particular ways to achieve

their purposes, for example, to tell what happened, to provide instructions, to entertain, to explain, to argue. Texts might assume particular forms such as emails, letters, speeches, books, websites and plays.¹⁹

Poetry is referred to in a later, subordinate paragraph in this section that mentions ‘literary texts’. But nowhere is it given priority. Neither, for that matter, are novels and plays. But they are not under a cloud today or, in certain stretches of education, simply absent. If poetry’s demise is to be reversed, a national curriculum needs positively, proactively to reaffirm it, in order to resuscitate it.

Encouragingly, in the documents for the earliest years, poetry does take centre stage, under ‘Literature’. The first section, here, entitled ‘Recognising and responding’ (for Year 1 pupils: that is, five-year-olds), recommends that they be required to

Listen to, recite and perform children’s poems, chants, rhymes and songs.²⁰

Then, for Year 2:

Identify and reproduce rhythmic patterns and word patterns in children’s poems, chants, rhymes and songs...

as well as (under ‘Choices and techniques’), for the same children,

Appreciate how authors use a range of devices, including alliteration, onomatopoeia, repetition, rhyme and rhythm, to express ideas.²¹

But, by Year 5, the excellent foundations that have been envisaged here are not built upon; indeed, are unaccountably abandoned and the kinds of approaches that are to dominate and come to their climax in Year 12 are

¹⁹ Australian Curriculum Consultation Portal, www.australiancurriculum.edu.au (accessed 6 August 2010), p.4.

²⁰ Ibid., p.10.

²¹ Ibid., pp.13, 14.

now introduced. Under ‘Recognising and responding’ for Year 5 pupils, for instance, we have this direction:

Draw connections and make inferences about the experiences of characters in literary texts and their own experiences.²²

How could a ten-year-old child relate his or her experiences to that of the melancholic-stoic twenty-year-old Housman, in ‘Loveliest of trees, the cherry now...’? Yet, in other ways, the poem’s beauty of language, especially in evoking the natural world, communicates a universal emotion and appreciation, not confined to an individual reader’s experiences or particular stage of maturity.

The kinds of approaches that are now prevailing are more suited, obviously, to fiction and drama. Recitation and performance have fallen completely out of sight. Yet the technical study of poetic texts is not entirely given up, and it is good to see the content description for Year 9 including reference to

poetry (eg [*sic*] thematic study of poems drawn from a range of historical, cultural and social contexts, sonnets, lyrics, odes).²³

But this sort of suggestion is notable for its rarity.

One of the conclusions that must be drawn from the document is that the curriculum authors regard the speaking of poetry (and the general appreciation of it as an oral art) as belonging to early childhood, along with learning and chanting the multiplication tables and trilling up and down the sol-fa scale. And this is why otherwise very gifted students reading English at the University can be tongue-tied when asked to read out loud even a stanza or two of poetry in class. They haven’t done it since they were small children. Most worryingly, they haven’t taken poetry to heart, not having learnt it by heart by becoming used to speaking it and reciting it. Why this should be regarded as (and relegated to) an infantile exercise and not as an ability, talent and, indeed, a pleasure that a maturing literary-minded young person would inevitably possess after twelve years in the English

²² *Ibid.*, p.23.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.37.

classroom is impossible to understand. We would think that he or she was a very underdeveloped musician who could display little accomplishment in that performing art after more than a decade's instruction in it.

It is when we turn to the lists of suggested texts for Year 12, however, that we encounter nothing less than the dismantling of the study of poetry in its historical and canonical dimensions. There are four lists, for the different levels and kinds of English study proposed (Essential English, English, English as an Additional Language, Literature). In all of these, there are just four poets – Blake, Keats, Dickinson and Barrett Browning (in her case, in conjunction with F. Scott Fitzgerald) – prior to the twentieth century and most of the poets suggested are twentieth-century Australians, although arguably the greatest of these, Les Murray, is notable for his absence. Amongst twentieth-century poets, Yeats and Eliot (for example) are nowhere to be seen.

In reviewing text lists in Year 12 syllabi for more than a generation, I have never encountered such an impoverished menu of poets suggested for study. The whole wondrous world of poetry in English, from Chaucer to the beginning of the nineteenth century, has simply been eliminated. Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Jonson, Herbert, Milton, Marvell, Dryden, Pope, Gray (for example) are gone, and while there are Blake, Keats, Dickinson and Barrett Browning from the entire nineteenth century, their presence highlights the absence of the greater Wordsworth, Coleridge and Tennyson. This is the dismantling and obliteration of the poetic culture of the English-speaking peoples (to which Australians belong). It is the equivalent of studying Greek without Homer, Latin without Virgil, Italian without Dante, German without Goethe.

To take just the first of the poets who have been abandoned: Geoffrey Chaucer. It is difficult to imagine a richer or more entertaining collection of characters and insights into their humanity than he assembles in a series of telling poetic vignettes in the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*. I remember studying this myself in Year 12 and the delight which a classroom of boisterous, eighteen-year-old Australian boys found (under the guidance of a skilled and devoted teacher) in this cavalcade of satirical and lovable creations. But equally valuably, in showing how poetry can go to the heart of human existence, the study of this text over several weeks taught us some very important truths: that the understanding, interpreting and evaluating of human nature is a process that poets have engaged in through the centuries (and, so, for us to grow in that understanding, there is

a wealth of material through the ages to investigate and we are certainly not confined, nor should we be, to the insights of the present or even the near-present, and/or of poetry by local writers); that poetry, with its requirements of compression and suggestive revelation can communicate truths and sheer entertainment to us, even if it was written several hundred years ago (perhaps especially so, as it affirms those lasting truths by its sheer historical distance from us). We also learnt that, given Chaucer's occasional difficulty and obscurity of vocabulary, syntax and Medieval learning and references, we must always be alert to and diligent in seeking the correct meanings of words in relation to their contemporary usage and learn to enjoy the quest for understanding which such close study of a text requires. And we were required to read that poetry out loud and try to come to grips with its deliciously strange sounds and to savour them, as I do to this day.

Similar comments could be made about any of the other poets I have listed in my selective historical conspectus. The National Curriculum would dispose of both this heritage and the range of valuable pedagogical and intellectual experiences (by no means confined to poetry, but emanating from its study) attendant upon it, which I have described.

IV

For the revival of the fame of poetry and its nurture, in twenty-first-century Australia, we need to look primarily to the schools and their curricula and to committed, gifted teachers of poetry, as well as ensuring the systematic teaching of poetry from Year 1 to 12 as an accumulating, ever-expanding element in the compulsory English syllabus. For example, the emphasis on learning and recitation of poetry in the early years of the proposed National Curriculum for English should be extended throughout the twelve years of school, in graded difficulty as students proceed. Further, in selecting poets and poetry for study, the present jettisoning of the great tradition of English verse and the replacement of it by an impoverished diet of mostly contemporary Australian poetry needs to be decisively reversed. A syllabus in which the breadth of the tradition of poetry in English, including but not dominated by modern and contemporary Australian poetry, could be easily devised and, indeed, used to be in place.

In the United States, in the highly successful and burgeoning ‘Poetry Out Loud’ national recitation contest (which this year attracted more than a third of a million highschool student participants from across the country), the list of selected poems from which students must choose is a generous compilation of the tradition. Why should Australian schoolchildren be offered a gruel-like regime in comparison with the feast of poetry to which their American counterparts are currently being exposed?²⁴ The 2011 winner of the competition, from Alabama, chose Matthew Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’ for his recitation.

Concomitantly, gifted and committed teachers need to be trained and this will only occur when units of study, particularly at senior and honours level, in Departments of English and Education Departments (where teachers are being specifically prepared for the classroom) are exclusively devoted to poetry and, especially, to its technical and historical aspects, and to nurturing the love of it as an oral art.²⁵

If poetry is to return to its rightful position at the centre of literary study and as a cherished companion in individuals’ word-stores and literary breadth of experience and to reclaim its place in the broad cultural life and memory of societies and nations whose collective ideas, feelings and beliefs it has individualistically and incomparably expressed, interrogated and celebrated in timeless language, through the ages, and into the future, all of us who are committed to professing and passing on this great legacy

²⁴ The list of pre-twentieth-century poems can be found here (as we remember that just *four* pre-twentieth-century poets are recommended for the Australian National Curriculum, and none prior to 1800):

www.poetryoutloud.org/poems/pre20century.html

²⁵ For several years, the senior unit, Reading Poetry, has been on offer in the Department of English at the University of Sydney. From the beginning, it has been one of the most popular of students’ choices, decisively disproving the misgivings of some colleagues, when it was first mooted, that students would not want to spend a semester reading poetry. To our surprise, in student evaluations of the unit, it has been the more technical components of the unit – for example, lectures on metre and scansion – that students have most relished. There has never been a single complaint, from the several hundred students who have now taken the unit, about its emphasis on knowledge of the historical development of poetry and the fact, as it has turned out through no particular policy but as a result of participating colleagues’ research and teaching interests, that no Australian material (and very little contemporary material) has been included.

of linguistic accomplishment, delight and wisdom in the English language must be very determined in our advocacy of it.

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