

NOTES ON THE TEACHING OF POETRY

by

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LECTURER IN EDUCATION
PENANG TEACHERS' COLLEGE

MALAYAN TEACHERS' HANDBOOK

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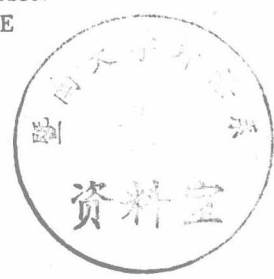
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EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Most people, before they read poetry, or attempt to write about poetry, project themselves into a special, poetic mood. They feel that they must shrug off crass reality and enter a world of spiritual and unearthly beauty. Poetry for them becomes ringed with a halo and is approached with an artificial reverence. Unquestionably this attitude to poetry is manifestly due to an incorrect approach in our schools. The author of this Handbook sets out to prove that a feeling for poetry is inborn in a child and that, if poetry appropriate to his age and aptitude is introduced to the pupil whilst at school, then a lasting and satisfying pleasure can be developed which will accompany him throughout his life.

Mr. Cooke does not pretend to explain exactly how to teach poetry for, as he says, it depends upon three intangibles which no one but the teacher himself can know—the background and interests of his pupils, the particular poem he intends to teach and, last but not least in importance, his own personality. But the writer does hope that this book will encourage Malayan teachers to introduce that element of enjoyment into their teaching of poetry which he regards as being so essential.

His conclusions are based on wide practical teaching experience in both Primary and Secondary Schools in the United Kingdom and Malaya and have been modified by discussions arising out of a series of lectures on the subject, given to Malayan teachers. Mr. Cooke's approach to the teaching of poetry is typical of the approach to teaching problems of other authors in this Handbook series in that it is simple and straightforward. The day-to-day problems of coping with fifty pupils in a classroom are never absent from the author's thoughts as he discusses the aims and methods of teaching poetry.

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I should like here to express my gratitude to my colleagues in the College, particularly those in the English Department; and to all others engaged in the furtherance of education in Penang and Province Wellesley. Without their assistance this book would lack whatever value it possesses; without their encouragement, it would not have been written.

The voice which is the voice of my poetry
Without imagination cannot be heard
Wordsworth

INTRODUCTION

Long introductions can be tedious and, anyway, are rarely read. For this reason, I shall keep mine to the barest minimum. Dryden, a great eighteenth century poet and critic, once said, "Poetry only instructs as it delights" and this may be taken as the key-note of my book. My constant theme throughout is that poetry is meant to be enjoyed and should be taught in such a way that it is. The different sections are but variations on this theme.

That a child learns far more effectively when he enjoys what he is doing, is a psychological principle which is rarely followed, despite its truth and obvious utility. This is especially true of poetry. But the examination, which has become the end rather than the means of education, has extended its malign influence even over such a subject as poetry which in my opinion should never be examined at the school level. Children are set to memorize, to paraphrase and to discover the meaning of every difficult word and phrase in a poem, as if this treatment will help them to understand what it is all about. Surely it is impossible to test successful teaching of poetry by standardized question papers set by external examiners. The real test of successful teaching is whether the child continues to read it for pleasure out of school and after his schooldays are over.

We should not be too concerned over finding a material value for everything we do in school. The value of poetry, like that of the other arts, is of a different and more beneficial nature. Despite popular belief to the contrary, these subjects are not luxuries but necessities. Our teaching is so centred upon the intellect that the feelings receive very little attention, although they count for so much in daily life. Poetry sustains and refines the feelings, just as study strengthens and improves the mind. It is for this very important reason, that it should be treated not as just another mental discipline, but as the thing of joy and beauty that it is.

That poetry is concerned, to quote the Norwood Report on Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools, "with values which must be caught rather than taught", makes it a very difficult subject to teach well. The delight and beauty of a fine poem cannot be mastered like a geometrical theorem; it must be communicated to the child by good teaching. But if it is a difficult subject, it is a highly rewarding one. Few other subjects have the same potentiality of suddenly capturing the imagination and enthusiasm of a class. Any teacher who has shared this experience knows how invigorating it can be.

There is much poetry quoted in this book. If, when you have finished it, you feel the desire to read more, I shall have accomplished much of what I set out to do. For those who can learn to love poetry and read it for pleasure are most of the way towards becoming good teachers of it.

WHAT IS POETRY?

Many writers, including poets, have attempted to define this form of writing which is in its essence indefinable. Robert Lynd has described great poetry as being, "memorable, with lines and phrases that repeat themselves hauntingly". Keats' famous lines:

*A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness;*

are an example and an echo of this definition. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch in his, "Verse is memorable speech set down in metre with strict rhythms", has attempted a stricter definition, but this too fails to capture the elusive beauty of such lines as these of Shakespeare:

*But, look, the morn, in russet mantle clad,
Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill.*

F. R. Leavis is perhaps nearer the truth when he states, "Poetry can communicate the actual quality of experience with a subtlety and precision unapproachable by other means". A feeling which is echoed by L. A. G. Strong's simpler, "A poem is the only way of saying something which must otherwise remain unsaid". But these last two definitions are explanations of what poetry does, rather than of what it is. The truth of the matter is that we can no more define poetry than we can define life itself, for poetry, like music, painting and sculpture, is an art and Art defies definition.

The poet is an artist in words and, like other artists, his imagination is very keen and his power of observation great. Others may think and feel as keenly as the poet does, but only he can embody his thoughts and feelings in the most perfect words. He chooses this particular form to express what he feels because prose, which is a less delicate instrument, is incapable of expressing it so well. To paraphrase the definition provided by F. R. Leavis, only poetry is capable of communicating the actual quality of the experience with the subtlety and precision necessary to the artist.

When Wordsworth pondered upon the rainbow he had seen, his thoughts went back to his childhood and he remembered how the sight had always thrilled him. A rainbow is beautiful to see and few of us could gaze upon one without a feeling of pleasure. It is doubtful, though, whether the sight would evoke the train of thought in our minds that it did in Wordsworth's. The point is, of course, the great poet looks upon the world in a way denied to most other men and, in so doing, he often notices things which we might miss. This is well illustrated by Wordsworth's

*To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.*

Through his poetry, the poet seeks to make this vision clear to us and if we are sufficiently responsive, we are able to share it with him. An outstanding feature of great poetry is that it makes us imagine more intensely and feel more sensitively about things. Those who can really share with Wordsworth the experience of the rainbow will never look upon one in quite the same way again. In other words, it will have modified their experience of a rainbow.

A fine example of the way in which a poet can modify our experience is provided in the opening line of Blake's 'TIGER'. Blake desires to make us feel with him all the fierceness, energy and beauty of the tiger. All these attributes are essentially those, too, of a raging fire and so Blake compresses them all into the single, wonderfully evocative metaphor,

Tiger, tiger, burning bright,

and gives us one of the most memorable lines in all English Literature.

Blake communicates with great vividness the feeling of wonder and mystery which the tiger arouses in him and all great poets share this gift of making their world clear to us, provided that we have the eyes to see it. They tell us all that they have found wonderful in colour, sound, touch or taste and which, but for them, we might never have noticed :

*Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.*

We can share this feeling of delight, but all too often we find this difficult and we are not sufficiently interested to make the effort. It is far less of an effort for the child, who shares much of the delight which the poet feels in the world around him. The small child, in particular, regards the world with the same fresh wonder and notices, with the poet, much of what we adults miss. This wonder is finely expressed by Wordsworth in his 'ODE ON THE INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY FROM RECOLLECTIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD' and T. S. Eliot¹ has captured much of it in his beautiful image of the young child,

*..... taking pleasure
In the fragrant brilliance of the Christmas tree
Pleasure in the wind, the sunlight and the sea.*

Children look at the world through the eyes of the poet; therefore poetry has a natural attraction for them. Another reason why they naturally like poetry is because of its rhythm. As Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch implies in his definition, rhythm is the most important single feature which differentiates poetry from prose. The first poets sang their words to the music of a harp or some other musical instrument. Though the harp has been superseded, the rhythm remains and rhythm

1. 'ANIMULA' from *Collected Poems 1920-1935* (Faber & Faber Ltd.).

is a fundamental element in our mental life. Every child loves rhythmic sounds and movements and even adults will impose an element of rhythm into some tedious, repetitive task like sawing or chopping wood. This love of rhythmic repetition, which is universal, springs from deep physiological sources. Rhythm rules in all such activities as breathing, muscular action in the circulation of the blood. It is only natural, then, that children should love it and that it should play such an important part in music and poetry.

Children can even enjoy poetry which is largely beyond their understanding, if it is read with marked rhythm. T. S. Eliot, who is outstanding both as a critic and a poet, has written, "we can be deeply stirred by hearing the recitation of a poem in a language of which we understand no word". Mr. Greening Lambourn¹ describes how he once heard a classical scholar read a passage in Greek to some English boys of twelve who knew no language but their own. "They listened breathlessly and then told him that there had been a challenge, a fight, and a song of triumph—which was really the 'substance' of the passage."

This natural feeling for rhythm which children possess, accounts for their great liking of nonsense poems. The best poetry of this type, notably that of Edward Lear, comprises music of a high order and children enjoy it as such. Many of the most popular and imaginative of English nursery rhymes are of this description. 'Hey diddle, diddle, The cat and the fiddle' and 'Hickory, dickory, dock' are two well-known examples which immediately spring to mind. Lewis Carroll's

*'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogroves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.*

is an example of pure nonsense poetry which is also fine music. In this verse and throughout much of the remainder of the poem, 'JABBER-WOCKY' which appears in *Through the Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll has invented a new and original language, his aim being to make the sound of the word suggest its meaning. Alice's reaction when she had read it was, "It seems very pretty, but it's rather hard to understand". But of course, this is the point of it. We are not intended to understand it, we are meant to delight in the strangeness of its words and the harmony of their arrangement.

The same writer's 'THE WALRUS AND THE CARPENTER' is a nonsense poem but of a slightly different type. What appears in it is not just a mere lack of sense but rather a parody of it. Edward Lear is the great master of this type of poetry and T. S. Eliot pays it the following high compliment. Lear's "non-sense" is not vacuity of sense: it is a parody of sense, and that is the sense of it. 'THE JUMBLIES' is a poem of adventure, and of nostalgia for the romance of foreign voyage and exploration; . . . We enjoy the music, which is of a high order, and we enjoy the feeling of irresponsibility towards the sense." Children

1. *Rudiments of Criticism.*

are captivated by Lear's poetry and especially by 'THE JUMBLIES'. They love to hear it well read, to repeat its amusing but harmonious refrain,

*Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumbles live.
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to see in a Sieve.*

and they love to draw the pictures evoked in their minds by its unusual imagery.

All this does not mean that you should make a practice of reading to your pupils poems written in a foreign language or that you should give them an unrestricted diet of nonsense verse. Nor does it mean that you should ignore the sense of a serious poem in English. But it does illustrate well, that the value of a poem does not lie exclusively in its sense and that its emotional appeal to the child, through his natural love of rhythm, is of tremendous importance. Certainly, if read intelligently and well, the marked rhythm of Browning's

*I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris, and he;
I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three;
"Good speed!" cried the watch, as the gate-bolts undrew;
"Speed!" echoed the wall to us galloping through;*

is, to the child, of irresistible appeal whether he understands fully the meaning or not.

GOOD AND BAD POETRY

Poetry, as I have said, is an Art. The corollary is that it is meant to be appreciated and enjoyed. It must never be allowed to become wearisome for either teacher or child. The surest way to prevent this happening is for the teacher constantly to extend his range of appreciation. This entails reading and studying an increasing number of good poems, of both the past and the present, and making a real effort to understand and enjoy them. This is necessary as much for those who like poetry, as for those who dislike it. If you are a lover of poetry, you will increase your understanding of it; if not you may learn to love it for it is often ignorance which causes dislike. We rarely like those things which we cannot understand and which we are not much good at. Certainly, if we do not have that genuine love of poetry which results from a wide reading and understanding of it, we can never teach it effectively. If you feel that this is beyond you or that you have no particular inclination one way or the other, it would be better for you and for the children concerned if you never taught poetry at all.

A very important argument in favour of the range of reading and study which I have outlined above, is the need for every teacher to establish a criterion; that is to be able to distinguish between what is good and bad in poetry. This is no easy matter, for even the compilers of anthologies can err in their judgment. The value of many an otherwise fine anthology has been reduced through the inclusion of one or two poems of poor quality. The type of verse which appears on greetings cards and in children's comics is not poetry at all but doggerel of the poorest type. The verses quoted below are better but hardly fit to be called poetry.

MY MOTHER

*When I look back across the years,
To that dear old Mother mine,
I see her young and fair again,
Her face with youth a-shine.*

*Now she is gone away forever,
That dear old Mother mine,
But in my mind will always linger,
That sad, sweet face so fine.*

This is obviously a bad poem, but why has the writer failed? He has attempted to express a real and fine emotion, the memory of a dead mother whom he loved dearly; but he lacks the ability to transmute this emotion into poetry and communicate it to his readers. The poem is poorly expressed and totally lacking in clear visual imagery. We have only the vaguest picture of what the writer's mother was like. She

lacks any special quality that would distinguish her from any other woman of her type. She is, in fact, the stock figure of a mother, the popular sentimental conception of what the perfect mother should be. The use of the repetitive line 'that dear old Mother mine', which fine lyricists use so effectively, is merely monotonous here. The music in these stanzas is of the most elementary kind. It is a mere jingle of sounds which lack the volume to convey adequately the writer's true feelings. What we have instead of poetry is doggerel, and instead of the expression of the fine emotion which the writer doubtless felt, emotionalism, which is a very different thing.

In contrast, here is an attractive modern poem, 'ON A LITTLE BIRD' by Martin Armstrong.

*Here lies a little bird.
Once all day long
In Martha's house was heard
His rippling song.
Tread lightly where he lies
Beneath this stone
With nerveless wings, closed eyes,
And sweet voice gone.*

The subject is a far less elevated one than the loss of a mother and yet how much better is the feeling of loss suggested. The wistful sadness of the theme is beautifully conveyed by the slow movement of the two long sentences in which the sense is carried over from the length of a single line into the two which follow. Notice how clear and effective are the images conjured up by 'rippling song' and 'nerveless wings'. This is true poetry; the other is merely the shadow of it.

'MY MOTHER' is an example of a bad poem with a serious subject. I should like here to draw briefly the distinction between this and good poetry with an apparently trivial subject. Some of the gayest and most delightful of English lyrics are of this description. You may not agree with the hedonistic philosophy expressed in Herrick's

*Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying:
And this same flower that smiles to-day,
To-morrow will be dying.*

or the frank cynicism of Suckling's 'THE CONSTANT LOVER',

*Out upon it, I have loved
Three whole days together!
And am like to love three more,
If it prove fair weather.*

but this does not detract from their value as poetry. We do not blame Jane Austen for failing to write powerful indictments of society as did Dickens, or Sheridan because he did not write with the dramatic power of Shakespeare. Both of these great writers have given much pleasure

through their works and should be accepted for what they have, rather than be criticised for what they have not, written. Similarly we should accept Herrick and Suckling for the pleasure they give us, rather than complain because they did not write in the style of their great contemporary Milton. The very greatest poetry is never of this type, but there is much fine poetry that is. In Art, the message is less important than the way in which it is presented.

The most common form of bad poetry which is written for children is that which deals with fairies, animals and small children in a feeble, milk-and-watery way. To take only the subject of fairies, this kind of thing is quite common in childrens' anthologies,

*The fairies come and play at night,
When all our eyes are shut up tight,
They dance and dance all in a ring,
And as they dance, they sweetly sing.*

What is most noticeable is the poverty of the language, the monotony of the rhythm and the triteness of the rhyme. The imagery calls for no-comment, it is non-existent. It is, in fact, characteristic of the poor stuff which appears on greetings cards. Rose Fyleman's attractive poem on the same subject, 'A FAIRY WENT A-MARKETING', is of a very different calibre. Something of its charm can be conveyed by this quotation of its opening stanza,

*A fairy went a-marketing—
She bought a little fish;
She put it in a crystal bowl
Upon a golden dish.
An hour she sat in wonderment
And watched its silver gleam,
And then she gently took it up
And slipped it in a stream.*

The first thing that one notices is the beauty of the imagery and the clarity with which these excellent images, 'crystal bowl', 'golden dish', and 'silver gleam', are communicated. There is nothing vapid about this poem. It is admirably expressed and a high level of imagination is maintained throughout the length of it. It is the sort of poem which appeals to young children and at the same time extends their understanding. Similarly, there is nothing feeble about William Allingham's vigorous narrative poem 'THE FAIRIES'. This relates a story full of exciting incidents, in a strongly marked rhythm which appeals greatly to children. The movement and excitement discernible in the opening stanza, is characteristic of the poem as a whole.

*Up the airy mountain,
Down the rushy glen
We daren't go a-hunting
For fear of little men;*

*Wee folk, good folk,
Trooping all together;
Green jacket, red cap,
And white owl's feather.*

There is so much fine poetry of this type which is suitable for children, that it is never necessary to read your pupils the other kind. Yet much bad poetry is taught. Displayed on the walls of many classrooms in the Federation, are large cardboard charts upon which teachers have spent many hours, copying verses of no merit whatsoever. It is a melancholy thought that many of these teachers will continue to teach these poems for as many years as the cardboard lasts and cardboard, unfortunately, is a durable material. If you have to make a poetry chart, do make sure that you choose a good poem. There is a very wide field to choose from but if you are in doubt, and I am assuming here that you are a Primary teacher, you will not go far wrong if you select one of the more well-known nursery rhymes or any poem written by Christina Rossetti, Robert Louis Stevenson and, above all, Walter de la Mare, who is probably the finest of all the writers of children's verse. As a man, he never lost sight of his childhood, as a poet, he was a master of enchantment and mystery. As a result of both of these qualities, his poetry possesses for children an irresistible appeal. I have never yet met a class, either in England or in Malaya, which has failed to enjoy any poem of his that I have taken with them. 'THE FLY' illustrates something of the exquisite nature of his imagination and the beauty of his language.

*How huge unto the tiny fly
Must little things appear!—
A rosebud like a feather bed,
Its prickle like a spear;

A dewdrop like a looking-glass,
A hair like golden wire;
The smallest grain of mustard-seed
As fierce as coals of fire;

A loaf of bread a lofty hill;
A wasp a cruel leopard;
And specks of salt as bright to see,
As lambkins to a shepherd.*

Few nursery rhymes possess the beauty and subtlety characteristic of Walter de la Mare's poetry, yet many are highly imaginative and even the least pretentious have a vitality and rhythm which is absent from the poorer sort of children's verse. Particularly is this true of the imitations using nursery rhyme characters which appear in children's comics. Professor Cammaerts has written, "The nursery rhyme is essentially poetical because essentially music". What we should notice in particular is the tremendous range of this music, which varies from the simple movement rhythms of 'Hush-a-bye Baby' and 'This is the way

the ladies ride' to the more imaginative 'I saw a ship a-sailing', 'How many miles to Babylon' and the beautiful and evocative, 'I had a little nut tree'.

*I had a little nut tree,
Nothing would it bear
But a silver nutmeg
And a golden pear;
The king of Spain's daughter
Came to visit me,
And all for the sake
Of my little nut tree.
I skipped over water,
I danced over sea,
And all the birds in the air,
Couldn't catch me.*

Like all fine poetry this is made up of pleasant sights and sounds, of images and music. There is an atmosphere of glamour and enchantment about this poem which children love. Lovely but impossible fruits ripen in an unlikely way and the rumour of this improbable tree is sufficient to lure a princess, doubtless beautiful, from far across the sea. Robert Lynd has stated that this, more than many other serious poems, illustrates just what distinguishes poetry from prose. "Here is the imagination escaping from the four walls—laughing at the four walls—and building its own house out of nothing but beauty and rhymes."

One has only to compare such a rhyme as the one below, from a recent comic, with the simplest of nursery rhymes to realise its marked inferiority.

*Jolly fat old father bear
Has found a store of honey,
The bees are buzzing all around,
But the honey's in his tummy.*

This is the product of a very tired imagination, a point which is amply proved by the poverty of its language. Such words as 'jolly' and 'tummy' call for special comment. Both are feeble in the extreme. 'Tummy', of course, is an insult to the intelligence of any self-respecting child over the age of six. 'Jolly' is one of the great stock adjectives of English comics and is used to describe all sorts and conditions of characters, both human and animal. There is no particular harm in it, but it is weak because of its lack of precision. Unlike poetry which tells something in verse which could not be so well communicated in prose, this tells something in verse which, even in prose, would be unimpressive.

The best that can be said for this sort of verse is that it is harmless. Children might like it for they naturally enjoy much verse, including that which is insipid, whimsical and sentimental. But mere enjoyment is not enough. Though it is important, it must be combined with a

process of extending or 'stretching' the children in imagination and vocabulary. There is no justification for offering them something which will be repudiated later in life; in fact there is a positive danger. Children who are offered a diet of mediocre verse, all too often react against all poetry when they are older. The aim must be to find poetry which children will enjoy but from which they will, at the same time, derive lasting benefit. Fortunately there is a great variety of suitable good poetry of this type. A sound background of such verse will provide a firm foundation of discernment on which they can build an appreciation of better poetry when they are older. Although poetry is meant to be enjoyed, we must not allow ourselves to be mere entertainers; we must be teachers as well.