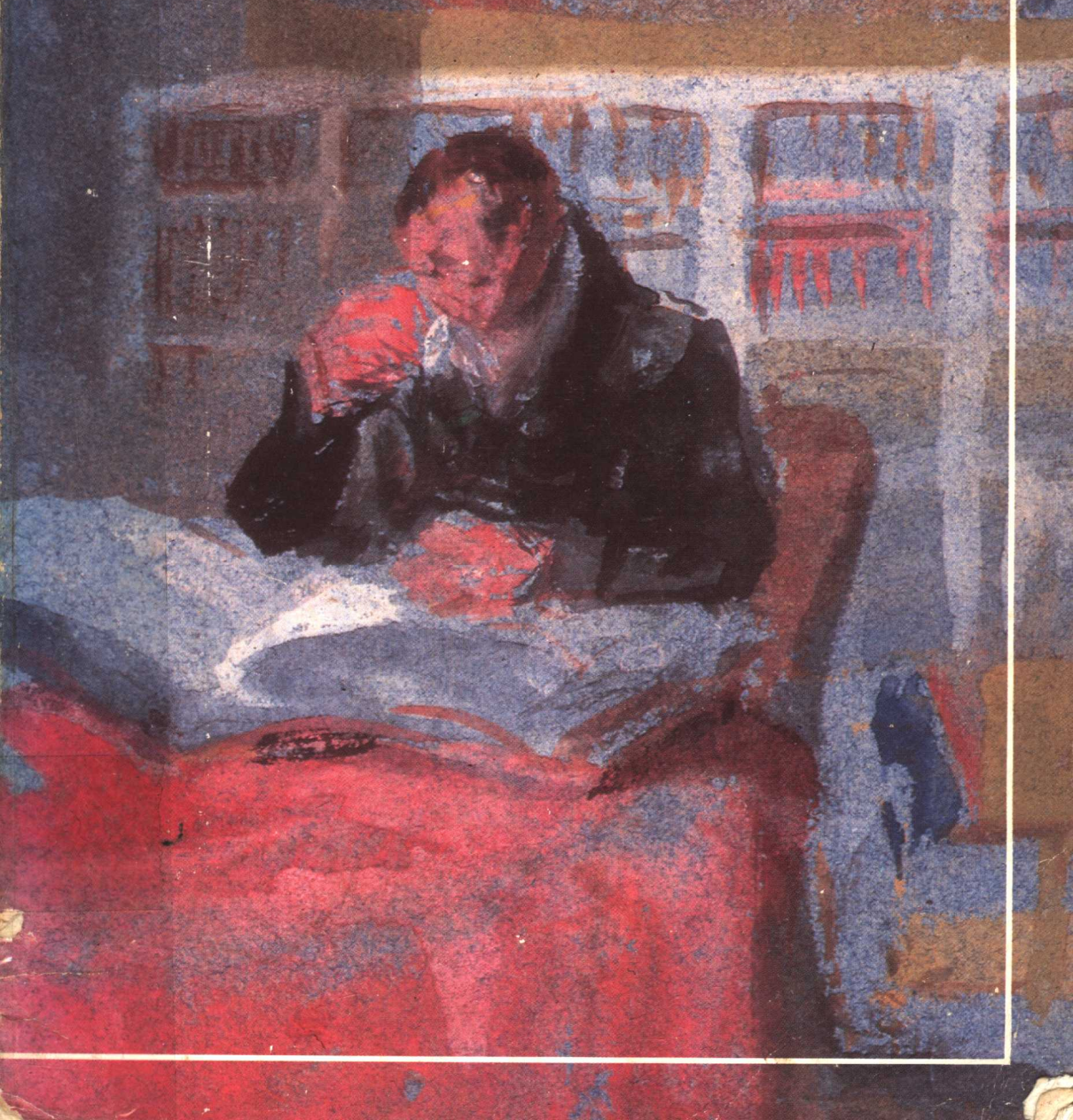


Second Edition

TO READ LITERATURE

Fiction Poetry Drama

Donald Hall



To Read Literature Fiction Poetry Drama

1971
SECOND EDITION

Donald Hall

Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

New York Chicago San Francisco Philadelphia
Montreal Toronto London Sydney Tokyo

Publisher: Robert Woodbury
Senior acquisitions editor: Charlyce Jones Owen
Special projects editor: Jeanette Ninas Johnson
Senior production manager: Nancy J. Myers
Design supervisor: Louis Scardino
Typography and cover design: Albert D'Agustino

Cover: Joseph Mallord William Turner, "Petworth: A man seated at a table in a study examining a book." Watercolour. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

Acknowledgments of copyright ownership and permission to reproduce works included in this volume begin on page 1252.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

To read literature, fiction, poetry, drama.

Includes index.

1. Literature—Collection. I. Hall, Donald,

1928- . II. Title.

PN6014.T64 1987 808.8 86-14819

ISBN 0-03-006207-1

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Address correspondence to:

Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

111 Fifth Avenue

New York, N.Y. 10003

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Printed in the United States of America

Published simultaneously in Canada

7 8 9 0 061 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

The Dryden Press

Saunders College Publishing

To Read Literature Fiction Poetry Drama



Best known as a poet, Donald Hall published his ninth volume of poems, *The Happy Man*, in 1986; the same year his play, *The Bone Ring*, opened Off-Off Broadway. The play will be published in 1987, along with *The Ideal Bakery*, a collection of short stories Hall has published in *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, and literary quarterlies. We believe that he is the only editor of a three-genre text who has himself done professional work in all three genres.

Hall works in other areas as well. His textbooks include *Writing Well*; one of his children's books, *Ox-Cart Man*, was awarded the Caldecott Medal in 1980. His magazine articles appear in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Yankee*, *Harper's*, *Esquire*, *Playboy*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*. In *To Read Literature*, he brings his many talents together—writing thousands of words of persuasive exposition to inspire American students with love of literature.

Donald Hall taught for many years at the University of Michigan. Now he writes full-time on the family farm in New Hampshire where he lives with his wife, the poet Jane Kenyon.

Other Texts by Donald Hall and Holt, Rinehart and Winston

To Read Fiction

To Read Poetry

Also by Donald Hall

Poetry

Exiles and Marriages
The Dark Houses
A Roof of Tiger Lilies
The Alligator Bride: Poems New and Selected
The Yellow Room
A Blue Wing Tilts at the Edge of the Sea
The Town of Hill
Kicking the Leaves
The Happy Man

Prose

String Too Short to Be Saved
Henry Moore
Writing Well
Dock Ellis in the Country of Baseball
Goatfoot Milktonque Twinbird
Remembering Poets
Ox-Cart Man
To Keep Moving
The Weather for Poetry
The Man Who Lived Alone
Fathers Playing Catch with Sons

Editions

New Poets of England and America (with R. Pack and L. Simpson)
The Poetry Sampler
Contemporary American Poets
A Concise Encyclopedia of English and American Poetry and Poets
(with Stephen Spender)
The Modern Stylists
A Choice of Whitman's Verse
Man and Boy
The Oxford Book of American Literary Anecdotes
Claims for Poetry
The Oxford Book of Children's Verse in America

Plays

An Evening's Frost
Bread and Roses
The Bone Ring

To the Student

To read literature

This book introduces the three principal types or genres of literature: fiction, poetry, and drama. When we learn to read literature, we acquire a pleasure and a resource we never lose. Although literary study is impractical in one sense—few people make their living reading books—in another sense it is almost as practical as breathing. Literature records and embodies centuries of human experience, preserving for us the minds of people who lived before us, who were like us and unlike us, against whom we can measure our common humanity and our historical difference. And when we read the stories, poems, and plays of our contemporaries they illuminate the world all of us share.

When we read great literature, something changes in us that stays changed. Literature remembered becomes material to think with. No one who has read *Othello* well is quite the same again. Reading adds tools by which we observe, measure, and judge the people and the properties of our universe.

In the fable of the ant and the grasshopper, the wise ant builds his storehouse against winter and prospers; the foolish grasshopper saves nothing and perishes. Anyone who dismisses the study of literature on the ground that it will not be useful—to a chemist or an engineer, to a foreman or an X-ray technician—imitates the grasshopper. When we shut from our lives everything except food and shelter, part of us starves to death. Food for this hunger is music, painting, film, plays, poems, stories, and novels. Much writing in newspapers, magazines, and popular novels is not literature, if we reserve that word for work of high quality. This reading gives us as little nourishment as most television and most fast food. For the long winters and energetic summers of our lives, we require the sustenance of literature.

Reading literature old and new—taking into ourselves the work of nineteenth-century Russian storytellers, sixteenth-century English dramatists, and contemporary American poets—we build a storehouse of knowledge and we entertain ourselves as well. But to take pleasure and understanding from literature we have to learn how to read it. No one expects to walk up to a computer and be able to program it without first learning something about computers. For some reason—perhaps because we are familiar with words from childhood and take them for granted—we tend to think that a quick glance at the written word should reward us, and that if we do not take instant satisfaction the work is beyond us, or not worth it, or irrelevant or boring. But all our lives, in other skills, we have needed instruction and practice—to be able to ride a bicycle, drive a car, play guitar, shoot baskets, typewrite, dance.

The knowledge we derive from literature can seem confusing. Equally great works may contradict each other in the generalizations we derive from them. One work may recommend solitude, another society. One may advise us to seize the moment, another to live a life of contemplation. Or, two good readers may disagree about the implication of a work and each argue convincingly, with detailed references to the writing, in support of contrary interpretations. A complex work of literature cannot be reduced to a simple, correct meaning. In an elementary arithmetic text, the answers may be printed in the back of the book. There are no answers to be printed in the back of this book or any collection of literature.

Such ambiguity disturbs some students. After an hour's class discussion of a short story, with varying interpretations offered, they want to know "But what does it mean?" We must admit that literature is inexact, and its truth is not easily verifiable. Probably the story means several things at once, *not one thing*. This is not to say, however, that it means anything that anybody finds in it. Although differing and defensible opinions are common, error is common also.

When we speak of truth in the modern world, we usually mean something scientific or tautological. Arithmetic contains the truth of tautology; two and two make four because our definitions of *two* and *four* say so. In laboratories we encounter the truth of statistics and the truth of observation. If we smoke cigarettes heavily, it is true that we have one chance in four to develop lung cancer. When we heat copper wire over a Bunsen burner, the flame turns blue.

But there is an older sense of truth, in which statements apparently opposite can both be valid. In this older tradition, truth is dependent on context and circumstance, on the agreement of sensible men and women—like the "Guilty" or "Not guilty" verdict of a jury. Because this literary (or philosophical, or legal, or historical) truth is inexact, changeable, and subject to argument, literature can seem nebulous to minds that require arithmetical certainty.

Let me argue this: If literature is nebulous or inexact; if it is impossible to determine, with scientific precision, the value or the meaning of a work of art, *this inexactness is the price literature pays for representing whole human beings*. Human beings themselves, in their feelings and thoughts, in the wanderings of their short lives, are ambiguous and ambivalent, shifting mixtures of permanence and change, direction and disorder. Because literature is true to

the complexities of human feeling, different people will read the same work with different responses. And literary art will sometimes affirm that opposite things are both true *because they are*. Such a condition is not tidy; it is perhaps regrettable, but it is human nature.

The words themselves

I have talked as if literature were the feelings and thoughts we derive from reading. Whatever literature accomplishes in us, it accomplishes by words. As paint and canvas form the medium of painting, as sequences and combinations of sound different in pitch, duration, and quality form the medium of music, so the best words in the best order make literature.

A Japanese named Basho wrote this haiku about three hundred years ago:

The morning glory—
another thing
that will never be my friend.

Basho reminds us that the natural world is separate from us, that we may not shoulder our way into it, like invading troops of the imagination, and assume that we are intimate with everything. The American poet Robert Bly translated these lines. Here are three other versions:

- A. The morning glory
is a separate being
and I can never know it intimately.
- B. The morning glory
is yet another object
with which I will never become closely acquainted.
- C. The morning glory—
something else
that won't call me companion.

To understand and appreciate how these four versions differ from one another is to become sensitive to the words that make literature. In a general way, they all mean the same thing. After the identical first lines, the translations differ in diction, which is the kinds of words chosen, and in rhythm, which is the pace and tempo of the words. Versions A and B are dry, stiff, and unnatural. *Separate being* sounds pretentious compared to *another thing*. *Yet another object* is finicky with its *yet another*, and *object* is more scientific-sounding than the casual *thing*. "With which I will never become closely acquainted" is formal and distant, rhythmically slow. "And I can never know it intimately" lacks interest or surprise in its words. The simplicity of "that will never be my friend," coming to rest on the surprise of the last word, makes Bly's translation blossom in its final word. In version C, on the other hand, we have a translation nearly as pleasing as the original one. *Something else* has its own casual simplicity, and

the little action of *call me companion*—where the morning glory is imagined capable of speech—has some of the surprise that the original translation found in *friend*.

The difference is the words and their order.

What's good, what's bad

The claims I make for literature are large: that it alters and enlarges our minds, our connections with each other past and present, our understanding of our own feelings. These claims apply to excellent literature only. This introduction to literature suggests that some literature is better than other literature, and that some writing is not literature at all. Even if judgments are always subject to reversal, even if there is no way we can be certain of being correct, evaluation lives at the center of literary study.

When I was nineteen, I liked to read everything: science fiction, Russian novels, mystery stories, great poems, adventure magazines. Then for six months after an accident, sentenced to a hospital bed and a body cast, I set myself a reading list, all serious books I had been thinking about getting to. Of course there was a background to this choice: I had been taught by a good teacher who had directed and encouraged and stimulated my reading. I read through Shakespeare, the Bible in the King James version, novels by Henry James and Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. Toward the end of six months, taking physical therapy, I hurried to finish the books I had assigned myself; I looked forward to taking a vacation among private detectives and adventurers of the twenty-fourth century. I thought I would take a holiday of light reading.

When I tried to read the light things, I experienced one of those “turning points in life” we are asked to describe in freshman composition. I remember the dismay, the abject melancholy that crept over me as I realized—restless, turning from book to book in search of entertainment—that these books bored me; that I was ruined for life, that I would never again lose myself to stick-figure characters and artificial suspense. Literature ruined me for light reading.

To you who begin this book, I give fair warning. If you read these stories and poems and plays with attention, you may lose any taste you have for television sit-coms, for Gothic novels, for Rod McKuen. Something happens.

I don't mean to say that I was able to give reasons why Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel about a murder was better than Agatha Christie's or why Aldous Huxley's view of the future, though less exciting, was more satisfying than *Astounding Science Fiction*'s. But I began a lifetime of trying to figure out why. What *is* it that makes Shakespeare so valuable to us? The struggle to name reasons for value—to evaluate works of art—is lifelong, and although we may never arrive at satisfactory explanations, the struggle makes the mind more sensitive, more receptive to the next work of literature it encounters. And as the mind becomes more sensitive and receptive to literature, it may become more sensitive and receptive to all sorts of things.

. . . and to the Instructor

In making selections and in writing the text for this collection, I have tried to serve one purpose: to help students read literature with intelligence, gusto, and discrimination.

This book begins the study of fiction and poetry by examining whole examples, emphasizing that the goal of reading is not the analysis of parts, but the understanding of wholes. For fuller definition of literature's components, later chapters concentrate on parts: on characterization in fiction, for example, and on images in poetry.

Selections are frequently modern or contemporary; students best begin literary study without the distraction of an unfamiliar vocabulary. Of course it would be silly to let this principle cheat us of Shakespeare, and *Othello* is included. The drama section begins with translation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and extends in time through a contemporary play by Sam Shepherd.

I intend the text to be readable and entertaining while it remains serious. Because everyone is curious about the lives of authors we read (whether we ought to be or not), there are biographical notes on all the writers. My emphasis is nevertheless neither biographical nor historical but aesthetic: I mean to examine the way literature works. Discussing characterization, I wish to find the writer's practical means toward characterization—in his choice of words, in his dialogue and description.

Footnotes and glosses translate foreign-language material, provide essential identifications, and define words not available in many dictionaries, or words used in archaic sense. The Appendix, "To Write about Writing," should provide guidance for students preparing papers on literature.

I've taken advice from several hundred American teachers of literature. When this book was only a notion, several years back, many people answered a questionnaire about what it should include. I am grateful; I have followed many suggestions.

Other professors read portions of the manuscript and commented in detail. I should like especially to thank Sylvan Barnet, R. S. Beal, Gary Blake, John Boni, Larry Champion, Barbara J. Cicardo, Paul Davis, R. H. Deutsch, Richard Dietrich, Donald Drury, John L. Fell, Art Goldsher, Randolph Goodman, William J. Gracie, Jr., Barnett Guttenberg, Nancy J. Hazelton, Michael Hogan, Woodrow L. Holbein, John Huxhold, Henry E. Jacobs, Robert C. Johnson, John J. Keenan, Mike Keene, X. J. Kennedy, Hannah Laipson, Bette B. Lansdown, James MacKillop, James Moody, William W. Nolte II, Anne Pidgeon, Doris Powers, Jules Ryckebusch, H. Miller Solomon, Joe Sperry, William Stull, Cathy Turner, Martha Weathers, and James D. Welch.

Collaboration and help at Holt, Rinehart and Winston began with Harriett Prentiss and continued with Kenney Withers, Susan Katz, and Nedah Abbott, editors to whom I am especially grateful. Pamela Forcey was masterful at production and H. L. Kirk a superb copy editor. Anita Baskin, Emily Barrosse, and Charlotte Smith handled permissions and many other matters.

Finally, let me thank my own helpers in New Hampshire, in Ann Arbor, and in Santa Monica: Lois Fierro, Sharon Giannotta, Dorothy Foster, Pat Wykes, and Frank Barham—not to mention Jane Kenyon.

For the second edition, I was greatly helped by my editor Charlyce Jones Owen and by my editorial production team of Jeanette Ninas Johnson, Nancy Myers, and Louis Scardino. Others who read portions of the manuscript and made helpful comments were: Anne C. Armstrong, Walters State Community College; Ellen Bourland, George C. Wallace Community College; William O. Boggs, Robert Morris College; Flynn Brantley, Emory University; Peggy Cole, Arapahoe Community College; Joseph A. Cosenza, St. John's University; James M. Creel, Alvin Community College; Ann B. Dobie, University of Southwestern Louisiana; Linda Dyer Doran, Volunteer State Community College; Terry Frazier, University of North Carolina—Charlotte; Chris Henson, California State University—Fresno; Charles C. Hobbs, Carson-Newman College; Nancy Ken-sicki, Gallaudet College; Lynn Kloesel, Butler University, Mary Kramer, University of Lowell; Leonard Leff, Oklahoma State University; Zorka Milich, Nassau Community College; Otto Lewis Pfeiff, Arapahoe Community College; Benjamin Saltman, California State University—Northridge; Darlene Harbour Unrue, University of Nevada—Las Vegas; Judith S. VanAlstyne, Broward Community College; John A. Wood, McNeese State University.

I owe a special debt to Dick Maxwell, of Foothill College in Los Altos, California.

D. H.

To Read Literature Fiction Poetry Drama

Contents

To the Student v

... and to the Instructor ix

TO READ A STORY 1

- 1 One Modern Short Story 3
William Faulkner A Rose for Emily 4
 Plot 12 / Character 14 / Point of View 14 / Setting 15 /
 Theme 15 / Symbolism 16
- 2 From Parable to Sketch to Short Story 17
 The Parable 17
from The Gospel According to Mark 18
 The Fable 18 / The Fairy Tale 19
Rumpelstiltskin 19
 Jokes 21 / The Sketch 21
Ernest Hemingway sketch 21
 The Short Story 22
- 3 Telling Good Fiction from Bad 23
- 4 Plot 26
James Thurber The Catbird Seat 28
Flannery O'Connor A Good Man Is Hard to Find 34

5 Character 46

- Characterization 46 / Characters Round and Flat, Dynamic and Static 47
James Joyce Counterparts 48
Eudora Welty A Worn Path 56

6 Setting 63

- Margaret Atwood* Dancing Girls 64
Peter Taylor A Spinster's Tale 74

7 Point of View and Irony 89

- Irony and the Unreliable Narrator 92
John Cheever The Chaste Clarissa 94
Tillie Olsen I Stand Here Ironing 101
Anton Chekhov Gooseberries 107

8 Style and Tone 115

- John Updike* Ace in the Hole 117
Ernest Hemingway A Clean, Well-Lighted Place 124

9 Theme 128

- Looking for Themes 129
Katherine Anne Porter Rope 130
Richard Wilbur A Game of Catch 135

10 Symbolism 138

- Nathaniel Hawthorne* Young Goodman Brown 140
Franz Kafka A Hunger Artist 149

11 Two Modes of Contemporary Fiction 156

- Fantasy and Absurdity 157
Donald Barthelme Some of Us Had Been Threatening
Our Friend Colby 157
Science Fiction 160
Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Harrison Bergeron 161

12 Longer Fiction: The Short Novel 166

- Leo Tolstoy* The Death of Ivan Ilych 167

Stories for Further Reading 204

- Toni Cade Bambara* The Lesson 204
Ann Beattie A Vintage Thunderbird 209
Jorge Luis Borges The Secret Miracle 220
Raymond Carver A Small, Good Thing 225
Kate Chopin The Story of an Hour 240
Frank Conroy Midair 242
Ralph Ellison Battle Royal 254

<i>William Faulkner</i>	<i>Spotted Horses</i>	263
<i>Mavis Gallant</i>	<i>Acceptance of Their Ways</i>	275
<i>Langston Hughes</i>	<i>On the Road</i>	281
<i>James Joyce</i>	<i>The Dead</i>	284
<i>D. H. Lawrence</i>	<i>The Rocking-Horse Winner</i>	311
<i>Bernard Malamud</i>	<i>The Magic Barrel</i>	321
<i>Alice Munro</i>	<i>The Found Boat</i>	332
<i>Frank O'Connor</i>	<i>Guests of the Nation</i>	338
<i>Frank O'Connor</i>	<i>My Oedipus Complex</i>	346
<i>Edgar Allan Poe</i>	<i>The Murders in the Rue Morgue</i>	354
<i>Katherine Anne Porter</i>	<i>The Jilting of Granny Weatherall</i>	375
<i>Isaac Bashevis Singer</i>	<i>Gimpel the Fool</i>	381
<i>John Steinbeck</i>	<i>The Chrysanthemums</i>	390
<i>James Thurber</i>	<i>The Secret Life of Walter Mitty</i>	397
<i>Alice Walker</i>	<i>Nineteen Fifty-five</i>	401
<i>Eudora Welty</i>	<i>Why I Live at the P.O.</i>	410
<i>Edith Wharton</i>	<i>Roman Fever</i>	418

TO READ A POEM 427

1	Good Poems and Bad	429
	<i>Robert Frost</i>	<i>Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening</i> 429
	<i>William Carlos Williams</i>	<i>so much depends</i> 437
	<i>Wallace Stevens</i>	<i>Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock</i> 440
		<i>Some Bad Poems</i> 442
	<i>Edgar Guest</i>	<i>The Rough Little Rascal</i> 443
	<i>Rod McKuen</i>	<i>This is the way it was</i> 443
2.	Poems Are Made of Words	446
	<i>Robert Francis</i>	<i>Hogwash</i> 449
	<i>Thomas Hardy</i>	<i>During Wind and Rain</i> 450
	<i>Marianne Moore</i>	<i>Silence</i> 451
	<i>Robert Frost</i>	<i>The Gift Outright</i> 452
	<i>Ben Jonson</i>	<i>On My First Son</i> 452
3	Images	454
	<i>H.D.</i>	<i>Heat</i> 454
	<i>Robert Herrick</i>	<i>Upon Julia's Clothes</i> 455
	<i>Allen Ginsberg</i>	<i>First Party at Ken Kesey's with Hell's Angels</i> 455
	<i>William Carlos Williams</i>	<i>Nantucket</i> 456
	<i>Denise Levertov</i>	<i>The World Outside</i> 457
	<i>Gregory Orr</i>	<i>Washing My Face</i> 458
	<i>James Wright</i>	<i>Lying in a Hammock . . .</i> 459
	<i>Pablo Neruda</i>	<i>Ode to My Socks</i> 461

4 Figures of Speech, Especially Metaphors	464
<i>Gregory Orr</i> All Morning	464
<i>William Shakespeare</i> Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?	466
<i>Charles Reznikoff</i> Holding the stem	468
<i>William Shakespeare</i> That time of year thou mayst in me behold	469
<i>Robert Creeley</i> The Hill	469
5 Tone, with a Note on Intentions	471
<i>E. E. Cummings</i> from Poem, or Beauty Hurts Mr. Vinal	472
A Note on Intentions	473
<i>Thomas Hardy</i> Transformations	474
<i>Richard Wilbur</i> Museum Piece	477
<i>Gary Snyder</i> Hay for the Horses	478
6 Symbols and Allusions	479
<i>William Blake</i> The Sick Rose	480
The Problem of Allusion	482
<i>Louise Bogan</i> To an Artist, to Take Heart	482
<i>Kenneth Rexroth</i> Proust's Madeleine	483
<i>Robert Frost</i> The Draft Horse	484
<i>Elizabeth Bishop</i> The Monument	484
<i>William Butler Yeats</i> The Apparitions	486
<i>Ezra Pound</i> The Return	487
7 The Sound of Poems	488
<i>John Milton</i> from <i>Paradise Lost</i>	488
Rhythm and Linebreak	489
<i>John Haines</i> from And When the Green Man Comes	490
<i>Walt Whitman</i> from Song of Myself	491
<i>William Shakespeare</i> from <i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>	492
<i>William Carlos Williams</i> As the cat climbed	493
<i>John Keats</i> from Ode to a Nightingale	492
<i>Robert Lowell</i> New Year's Day	495
<i>Gerard Manley Hopkins</i> I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark	496
<i>Walt Whitman</i> The Dalliance of the Eagles	497
<i>John Keats</i> To Autumn	497
8 Meter and Rhyme	499
Meter	499
<i>William Shakespeare</i> from <i>Richard II</i>	506
<i>Louis Simpson</i> To the Western World	507
Rhyme	508
<i>Louis Simpson</i> Early in the Morning	510
<i>Thomas Hardy</i> The Oxen	511
<i>Richard Wilbur</i> Tywater	511

9 Forms and Types of Poetry 513

Poetic Forms 513

Edward Gorey limerick 513*Moritaki* haiku 514*William Shakespeare* Let me not to the marriage of true minds 515*John Milton* On the Late Massacre in Piedmont 516

Poetic Types 516

Anonymous Edward 517*John Keats* La Belle Dame sans Merci 518*Robert Frost* "Out, Out—" 520*William Shakespeare* Winter (from *Love's Labour's Lost*) 521*Thomas Hardy* Epitaph on a Pessimist 522*Walter Savage Landor* epigram 522*J. V. Cunningham* two epigrams 522*Ezra Pound* The Bath Tub 522*George Herbert* Easter Wings 523*E. E. Cummings* concrete poem 523*Ian Hamilton Finlay* Homage to Malevich 524*Robert Bly* The Dead Seal near McClure's Beach 525*Russell Edson* Bringing a Dead Man Back into Life 526**10 Versions of the Same 527**

Poets' Revisions 527

William Butler Yeats four versions from Cradle Song 528*William Blake* two versions from London 529*John Keats* two versions from La Belle Dame sans Merci 530*Robert Frost* In White 530*Robert Frost* Design 530

Different Translations 532

four translations of The Twenty-third Psalm 533

Shakespeare in Paraphrase 534*William Shakespeare* two versions of Soliloquy (from *Hamlet*) 534**Three Poets 537***John Keats* 538On First Looking into Chapman's Homer 538 / When I Have Fears That I
May Cease to Be 538 / The Eve of St. Agnes 539 / Ode to a Nightingale
548 / Ode to a Grecian Urn 550 / This Living Hand 552*Emily Dickinson* 552He put the Belt around my life— 552 / He fumbles at your Soul— 553 /
After great pain, a formal feeling comes— 553 / The first day's Night had
come— 553 / Much Madness is Divinest Sense— 553 / I heard a Fly
buzz—when I died— 554 / I would not paint—a picture— 554 / I'm
ceded—I've stopped being Theirs— 554 / The Province of the Saved
moments— 554 / The Province of the Saved 555 / A still—Volcano—
Live— 555 / I cannot live with You— 555 / Me from Myself—to
banish— 556 / Because I could not stop for Death— 556 / My Life had