



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1985 Volume I: Poetry

Introduction

Poetry makes nothing happen.

—Auden

Nevertheless, our seminar happened, and a lot of things happened in it. Eleven teachers began it, and eight completed it. We agreed at the first meeting that we would divide our work into four phases: first, wide reading of poetry by everyone; second, reading and discussion of Robert Scholes's *The Elements of Poetry*, and of a series of American poets in Kenneth Koch's anthology *Sleeping on the Wing*; third, writing and discussing our own poetry; and finally, discussion of ways to teach poetry to our students. We also agreed that at each meeting we would all distribute copies of one poem we had read and liked since the last meeting. That turned out, in my opinion, to be a very happy practice: we probably spent more time, and more fruitful time, discussing those discoveries than any other poems—and many of them will reappear in our classrooms this year.

For me the seminar was a chance to put into practice a belief I have long held: that the training of a teacher should concentrate almost entirely on the subject rather than on teaching methods. Thus I made poetry, not how to teach poetry, the central subject, and encouraged the members of the seminar to trust that the one thing needful to make them good teachers of poetry was to know a lot of poems. I think there was general agreement about that, and that everyone came away from the seminar feeling a lot more at ease with the subject primarily because they had read so widely.

There were two other major sources of ease. One was that through a certain general good will we found ourselves discussing poems with a natural pleasure; we discovered that we were far more likely to draw full sense from a poem if we said openly what came to our heads about it, that we particularly liked this line for this reason, and disliked that line for that reason, than if we examined it for its metaphors or tried to name its mood or its theme. Our discussions were a constant reminder that the basic literary pleasure is first to read, then to talk about what you read. If a method of reading evolved, it was only honest attention—though I found myself championing especially two kinds of attention, to syntax and to allusive language, and I learned from the group to attend carefully to the truth of experience: we made a real advance in understanding our rights as readers when we concluded that Denise Levertov's "Merritt Parkway" was simply untrue, that she simply did not know the road as we know it.

The other source of ease was writing poetry ourselves. I think everybody was a little nervous about writing poems, and especially about exposing what they wrote to others. But we all did it, and the results were very

satisfying. We were pleased with what we wrote, and pleased with what others said, both in praise and in challenge and suggestion.

The experience seemed to catapult us all to a new status in our own relation to poetry. It also produced what I think of as the most memorable moment of the seminar. The first week, we didn't get to some of the poems, including Mary Sorrells's "Lost in Time." The next week, Mary announced that after listening to others' poems she had decided to rewrite hers completely; she asked us to return our copies of the first version, and hear and discuss the new version. But I disallowed that, and asked her to let us hear both. Here they are:.

Lost in Time

Moving toward you I thought.
Closer and closer I longed to see you here,
The dried shriveled leaves and perished moment
Like an autumn dismal day that comes this way.
The air smells of some moment when
Times have grown old.
Your presence is no more
A lullaby to my burning passion.
Longing for you comes like spring-green leaves
To stay like heaven's sky and
Constantly remaining in remembrance of you,
The scene of a sweet silent image.
An image no more now but then in that time.
Forever lost in time is you.

Sonnet: Lost in Time

Just getting to know her better,
And enjoying it too. Taking it
For granted that she would be around
For a very long time; it caught me
By surprise—a sad surprise.
Somehow she had managed to
Teach me what she thought
I needed to know. So, finally,
She had taught me my last lesson
That could not have been taught
Had she been here. The lesson she taught
Still remains, but the moments
We spent together through hard and good times
Are forever lost in timeMother.

Mary said that in fact the first version was about how she misses her mother; but she had realized after listening to others' poems (perhaps especially to Bill Coden's poem about his memories of his father) that she had simply not allowed the truth to come to the surface. She had as it were hidden her feelings beneath a series of "poetic" images. In the second version she eschewed imagery to say directly what was on her mind. She was clearly much better satisfied with the second version, and we were, too, though we had some discussion over whether withholding the word "Mother" to the very end wasn't a little overdone: some said that, though in fact honestly felt, it ran the risk of allowing a certain institutionalized piety about motherhood to intrude on the utterly personal voice heard throughout. What was instructive for us in hearing both poems was not just the value of revision but the value of honesty, and of plain language and clear syntax. There is a certain sacrifice: the first version, though fragmented and a little blurred, has a number of well-turned phrases and evocative images. The second version sacrifices imagery entirely, and does not call attention to individual phrases, but it has integrity and clarity; it is a well-shaped whole. It moved us, where the first did not. It seemed to me at that moment that our seminar was a success—not only because it had brought forth so fine a poem, but especially because the good will people displayed had made possible both a full account on Mary's part of the process of writing, and a full response on our part to that experience.

Our final classes, on teaching poetry, drew on both the past experience of the membership and on the units they were by now almost finished developing; on Kenneth Koch's magisterial book *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* ; on the account of their experience teaching poetry to children by two visitors, Daniel Duffy and Eric Stenclik (who also reported on what it was like to be taught by Kenneth Koch); and on Myra Cohn Livingston's recent provocative book, *The Child As Poet* . Bill Coden and Linda McGuire each treated us to a sample class from their unit.

The seminar ended sadly with the death of one of our members, Phyllis Taylor, on August 5. Phyllis was an English teacher at Sound School, and had been a member of several previous Institute seminars. She was already under treatment for cancer when our seminar began in March, but she attended our meetings faithfully until she was hospitalized in mid-June (where she continued to follow the work of the seminar). She was planning a unit in which she would put together groups of poems that had a common element: a specific rhythm, a certain sensory impression, a movement from concrete to abstract. It takes a pretty wide knowledge of poetry to do that, but Phyllis had it: she was the best-read member of the seminar. She seems to have been a voracious reader all her life. I have a sweet memory of visiting her in Gaylord Hospital and listening to her reminisce with her mother about the public library near her childhood home in Pittsburgh, and a certain librarian who granted her free access to the Adult Section at the age of eleven. But she brought to any poem a vigorous experience of life, not just of books. Once when Tony Franco brought in a poem entitled "The Double Play," by Robert Wallace, and we were trying to decide why the distance from second base to first base is called "the colored tightened interval," Phyllis suddenly gave us a remarkably acute and detailed account of all the ways in which, at a night baseball game, the infield appears "tightened." She spoke in her characteristic direct, natural way, surely oblivious to my wonderment that this person who had read so many poems had also evidently spent a lot of time at baseball games.

Clearly she was an outstanding teacher. At her funeral I spoke with one of her students, who said Phyllis was "more like a friend than a teacher," and had "changed her life" by getting her to love reading. None of us in the seminar is unchanged by her either, though for all she taught us about poems, what she taught us most was how to face death with courage and cheerfulness. We dedicate this collection of poetry-teaching units to her memory.

Traugott Lawler

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