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“Fists and Flashing Eyes”
Approx. 1,025 Words

Fists and Flashing Eyes: On Teaching and Learning Through Poetry

Mrs. Van Duzer was a few inches shy of six feet, with gray-violet eyes. Her height was imposing, but her eyes are what I remember best: how they flashed as she pounded the cracked blackboard with her fist and cried, “No—no—*no!*”

One of our high school classmates had just asserted, with that myopic confidence only bright adolescents can muster, that the landscape in E. A. Robinson’s poem “The Dark Hills” symbolized death. Mrs. Van’s rejection of that idea, which had seemed so obvious to us all, silenced the class. She held her fist up against the dusty slate and glared around the room. Minutes passed. Then another hand, one of mine, went up.

“The hills stand for life after death.”

“NO!” roared Mrs. Van. And she launched into a long, angry lecture on the nature of poetry and poetic language. Exactly what she had to say is not important at the moment. What does matter is that she was teaching — and we were being taught.

Few writers can investigate the development of their art without discovering teachers

who had a shaping hand in it. In my case, I look back with wonder on the fist and the flashing eyes. Why is it that when my opinion—regarded by most liberal philosophies of education as sacred—was dismissed, I suddenly opened up to an understanding of what Robinson was doing with words? Why has that understanding continued to influence my reading of other poets and my own poetry as well?

The answers to these questions involve, I think, the idea of authenticity. Now authenticity is not much discussed these days. As the computer-based “information society” has flourished, non-quantifiable concepts such as authenticity have been swept aside. What place can they have in the greased lightning world of processed data, where all information is equalized into bytes and bits? In such a world the Sears catalog has as much validity as *Leaves of Grass*—perhaps even more: you can’t mail-order lawnmowers with *Leaves of Grass*. But you can do something analogous—and the literature that lets you do it the most is, from the information society’s point of view, the most authentic.

The activity I’m speaking of assumes that poets write in code about a finite number of known subjects or themes, and that the purpose of reading is to puzzle those themes out. If you can’t get lawnmowers, at least you can get a fistful of symbols. Now, once you accept the notion that poets encode (read: “turn into bytes and bits”) messages drawn from a finite canon (read: “program”), you’ve rendered poetry and its language safe for the average American reader.

It was against this notion that Mrs. Van Duzer raised her fists. She insisted that poetry, if read with intense imagination instead of simply being registered and sorted like data in a well-programmed computer, changes the way we experience the world. Themes, symbols, the

techniques of prosody, all are secondary to the fact of the poem as a structured experience. “The reader’s responsibility,” said Mrs. Van, her flashing eyes taking in the whole classroom full of college-bound faces, “your responsibility, is to *live through* that poem with as much imagination as you can muster. Then you’ll have earned the right to talk about symbols and themes.”

She sent us back to re-read “The Dark Hills” and write about it. The paper I produced was terrible: half jargon-ridden analysis, and half pious generalization. I had to rewrite it three times from beginning to end just to earn a “C” and Mrs. Van Duzer’s scrawled compliment: “I think you’re finally learning to read.”

Because I absorbed the lesson that no poem can be mastered by applying a “program” of general principles, I find that every poem demands my learning to read anew. (I exaggerate, of course. At times I fail to imagine a fine poem all the way through; other times, the poem I’m reading has not been thoroughly and intensely imagined by its author.) This relearning is, in fact, the only authentic response to an authentic poem—one which has been masterfully structured to influence the reader’s experience of the world. The symbol-mongering encouraged by what the information society calls education is about as far from authentic reading as one can get.

When it becomes clear that an authentic reading of an authentic poem influences the reader’s idea of reality, we can see why Plato (whose name has been borrowed, ironically enough, to designate a certain computer language) banished poetry from his ideal Republic. Reading it is a dangerous activity. For if each new poem, each new imaginatively structured byte of language, influences our experience of the program — why, individuals might actually come

to believe that their subjective experience of the world is more real than the one the information society's selling. “The Dark Hills”:

Dark hills at evening in the west,
Where sunset hovers like a sound
Of golden horns that sang to rest
Old bones of warriors underground,
Far now from all the bannered ways
Where flash the legions of the sun,
You fade—as if the last of days
Were fading—and all wars were done.

Imagine if every mountain sunset brought to mind the futility of war. It's a prospect that makes most politicians shudder!

Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that fists and flashing eyes in classrooms are more and more being replaced by the software of programmed “learning.” We shouldn't wonder that cutbacks in government support of the arts parallel drastic increases in military budgets and the institution of a peacetime draft. And we shouldn't be shaken by the fact that “mega-death” and “survivability” are built into the same rhetorical program.

On the other hand, maybe we ought to be surprised and full of wonder and deeply shaken. Maybe we ought to reach back through our lives to touch those teachers who convinced us that there was a time, as Canadian poet Dennis Lee puts it:

When men could say
My life, my job, my home
And still feel clean.
The poets spoke of earth and heaven. There were no Symbols.