

THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH POETRY TO TURKISH STUDENTS

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Today, teaching poetry to any group of young people would present problems at the start, for the very simple now common place reason that we live in an age in which there is little interest in or place for poetry. Unfortunately, our over-populated and over-mechanised societies are no longer favourable settings for the encouragement or advancement of poetry. This changed milieu has naturally affected the literary taste of the generations born into it. Young people in the modern world are largely conditioned by mass-media which has reawakened, in the words of David Lodge, the "oral-aural culture"¹. They are also conditioned by comics and best-sellers industries, horror movies, beat music and every other industry which wants to sell its products to the young. Yet, at the same time, they are exposed to an incredible amount of experience and general information inaccessible to most of us when we were at their age; from space travel to drugs, violence and to the revolution in sex. Thus our students naturally develop sharper sensibilities and wider interests, especially outside the classroom, and a strong and rather admirable resistance to pedantic teaching.

For those of us who have to teach English poetry in departments of English Studies in Turkey, there are other problems which have to be faced, resulting from cultural, linguistic and methodological difficulties. Many of our students are little interested in learning or studying poetry as compared with other types of literary expression, such as the drama or the novel. We also have to face the more serious problem, in my opinion, of the alienation from poetry in class of the students who enjoy poetry, which is an indication of a serious problem of methodology in teaching. I feel the need to mention here, a few of my personal statistics in relation to this problem. One of our few men students has told me that he liked poetry as a whole, but it was only learning it in class that spoiled his taste for it. Another, an exceptionally perceptive and intelligent student, has said that she believed there ought to be more to teaching poetry than just plain paraphrasing and explanation of the text; and still another, a very intelligent and conscientious graduate student has told me that he enjoyed poetry immensely when

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1. D. Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing*. London : E. Arnold Pub. Ltd. 1977

it was in Turkish, it was only when he read poetry in English that his sense of enjoyment was hindered. Knowing that he was a person who could put his lexical and linguistic information to use intelligently, it seemed only reasonable to question the ways in which poetry was being taught in classes.

Some of the points which the students have brought up concerning appreciation, are no doubt problems of criticism. How do you make them like poetry in class, is the concern of the instructor. But, our primary concern cannot be or ought not to be to make students like poetry by an over-scrupulous selection of attractive or appealing texts or by reading aloud in an effective tone of voice, putting the emphasis in the right places, or by a display of ingenious teaching tricks that may make classes more interesting (which no doubt make a difference and will have to be considered along the way), but to make them want to learn poetry in spite of the many works they may not find very appealing since we have to move within the limits of given curricula. This sounds like a very ambitious scheme and considerably difficult, yet the end can be achieved if the instructor can develop in the student, the confidence and the sophistication which results from having a command over the literary object. So, may I suggest that our primary concern be the teaching of skills which the students will be able to use all the time? Perhaps even such skills as may be used in relation to Turkish poetry?

This presentation hopes to face that problem and offer some solutions. I do not claim to have all the answers, but I hope some of my answers will lead to interesting and profitable discussions as to the teaching, the analysis and appreciation of poetry in class. The following presentation is a synthesis of information I have compiled through my reading of various critics and some years of teaching by trial and error.

I would suggest that a course in poetry be considered first as any other course in literature, within the main objectives of departments of English Studies. The instructor should make-up his mind whether to approach poetry historically or critically, in other words, should he concentrate on fact finding, on giving the student the poetry through the background information with more emphasis on the historical information than on texts themselves; or should he concentrate mostly on the texts themselves, considering them as autonomous wholes, letting the students have a first hand contact with as many texts as possible within the limits of the course. John Crowe Ransom in his article "Criticism Inc."² informs us that the tendency in departments of English Studies in his country at the time he wrote the article, was to deal mainly with the works themselves in class. The main objective, he tells us, ought to be the development of literary understanding, and an

2. John Crowe Ransom "Criticism Inc." *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, ed. David Lodge, Longman Ltd. London, 1972. ss. 228 - 241.

understanding of literary art he adds, will include criticism and "whatever may be meant by appreciation"³. Mr. Ransom believes that historical and linguistic studies are only aids in literary understanding, not ends in themselves. This of course, has been the debate in departments of English Studies in England, since the beginning of the century and following the importance attached to humanities in such universities as Cambridge and Oxford. For us in Turkey, it seems wise to suggest that our departments should aim at communicating the understanding of the art of poetry first, pointing to the significance of works themselves as literature and as art. In order to achieve this end, the instructor will have to take what Mr. Ransom calls a critical point of view. A working definition of the critical point of view would simply be the study or analysis of the literary object, that is the structure and the content of poetry within its own terms. I am using the word "criticism" in a narrow sense meaning a first-hand study of a poem which would involve the devoting a greater part of the course time to the texts themselves.

This unfortunately can only be the ultimate end in teaching literature to non-native speakers. There are other barriers to be passed before reaching this point. The barriers of culture and language which need to be overcome when teaching any kind of foreign literature are still perhaps our major handicaps.

T.S.Eliot in his article "The Social Function of Poetry" has said that poetry is mainly the expression of feeling and emotion and "it is easier to think in a foreign language than it is to feel in it. Therefore no art is more stubbornly national than poetry"³. He has added that poetry is much more local than prose in the history of European languages. He has emphasized that the special difficulty of understanding a foreign poetry comes from the intransferability of sensibility, feeling and emotion from one culture to the next through medium of a foreign language, unless that language is so much under control that, the person instinctively begins to feel in it, thus acquiring almost a "supplementary" personality by that language. We cannot assume that our students' knowledge of the English idiom is as such, thus we cannot plan to pour critically over a poem unless its meaning is understood. Seymour B. Chatman in his article "Linguistic and Teaching Introductory Literature" calls our attention to the average student's narrow grasp of structures and lexical possibilities. Notice that he is here talking about English speaking students. He suggests that a poetry text be treated as if it were a text in a foreign language for the above reason.⁴ I would suggest that perhaps in introductory course should deal more with linguistic difficulties of poetry texts than a more advanced course, but time should be devoted to linguistic analysis in all poetry courses.

3. Ibid.

4. Seymour B. Chatman, "Linguistics and Teaching Introductory Literature", *Readings in Applied Linguistics*, New York, 2nd. ed., Harold Allen, 1964. ss.500-506.

As to our students' familiarity with the English culture, we cannot take it for granted considering how different many concepts and values are from those of our culture, thus an historical adaptation of the mind will obviously be demanded of the student who is trying to understand his Chaucer his Milton or Spencer. Often, an historical approach very justly appears to be the only logical approach in teaching poetry when one considers that one's duty is many times just to teach the poetry of a certain period or a certain movement. I believe its best to deal, at the beginning of each course, with such historical and or biographical knowledge as may be necessary for the student to understand the nature of the poet's art or the characteristics of the school or the period with some special emphasis on the intellectual climate, the thought of the age. This is necessary in order to set the works in their right intellectual context. The external information will help the students see the poem in its social and cultural setting, but this information need not be tedious; it can be brief, clear and to the point.

The discussion or analysis of the actual poetry could be started, perhaps following a quick explanation of the difficult words and structures, with an analysis of the technique, to the purpose of making the student familiar with the formal rules and components of poetry. This involves looking into the special arrangement of the rhythm into patterns such as rhyme and other sound textures, stanza patterns or order of lines; the vocabulary, the syntax and diction. A poetry text gives the instructor the advantage of seeing the complete text in front of him as one unit of meaning so that he can go over the components of poetry with each new poem until the students fully grasp the nature of the art form and what poetic composition is about; as well as the special technical devices by which that poet has developed the content and achieved the form of that particular poem; in other words, the students would learn to classify experientially as well. As the students become more and more confident, they begin to distinguish the various linguistic and sound patterns of the structure of poetry and can comment easily on the function of each. As soon as the students gain sophistication in the knowledge of the formal rules, attention should be relinquished on those parts of the text which do not demand any special attention.

In analysing poetry, form should not be distinguished from content in any way to do harm to the poem. An equal consideration ought to be given to both. The students must not be made to think content is all by a mere paraphrasing of the content, nor must they be made to think form is more important by an over emphasis of the technique. Neither must the instructor take a particular critical point of view based on specialized information as his main argument, unless called for by a particular instance. Not only most critical theories are mutually exclusive, but also exclusive of some of the elemental information which the students need to have at the beginning. I would suggest that the surest way of handling form content relationship in class and may I underline in class, is to approach a poem as an organic whole, working the meaning into the form or the meaninglessness into the formlessness, but the analysis ought to be moved from technique to content to students must be taught that every element of form, each technical device is

chosen with the purpose of contributing to the communication of the experience or meaning of the poem and that the content acts on the form to give shape to it; that is, the meaning or the experience often dictates the form. Foreexample, it seems reasonable to suggest that the difference between the narrative structures of *Paradise Lost* and *The Waste Land* results basically from the difference between what each poet has to say about reality. Eliot's structures continually breakdown, because reality is broken down in his world, whereas Milton's unity of epic, his ordered narrative structure reflects the absoluteness of his religious reality. Thus, a choice of poetic technique, I would suggest, is an indication of the poets purpose as to his artistic content. If form is not intentional then its accidental; then there cannot be any real interrelation between form and content. And if form continually attracts attention to itself, it runs the risk of blurring the meaning. I would also make very clear that the elements of formal structure are neither absolute nor unchangeable. Any element of form had far better be absent from a poem if it is not doing something effectively and to the purpose. The feeling must be evoked that the poet's choice of technique is inevitably the right one and that any technical device which serves this purpose is very legitimate. These are all actually problems concerning the criticism of poetry, but good points to be made in class too.

Special linguistic problems should be worked into the analysis of the technique, since one is inevitably dealing with the patterning of the language when analysing the texture. The students must learn that poetry exploits all the linguistic possibilities of a language. They must be able to see that poetic language basically lapses from the prose norm, that it is both grammatically and semantically deviant, but the ungrammatical combinations of words in new kinds of structures may hold good only for poetry and not for prose. If necessary, such ungrammatical structures may be put by the instructor into their natural grammatical order for the sake of demonstrating the above point.

How do we swich gracefully from a discussion of the technique to the discussion of the content? I would suggest that the students attention be called to the usage of words, their sounds and textures, and to the fact that the connotative usage of words and imagery are dictated by the compact structure of poetry which calls for extreme condensation of thought and feeling in order to create new levels of meaning. It could be pointed out to the students that for this reason, the heart of the meaning and the experience of a poem could most probably be revealed through the imagery; pointing out that what matters most in an image is its power to present its subject clearly, with impact and suggestiveness. To be successful, an image must carry its meaning with impact, illuminating its subject, not obscuring it. This is why while Marvell's lines from "To His Coy Mistress" which read:

*But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near,
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.*

contain successful imagery clarifying two abstractions; time and eternity, Crashaw's lines describing the wounds of Christ as:

*Lo! a mouth, whose full-bloomed lips
At too dear a rate are roses:*

fail miserably by over-crowding the subject and attracting attention to itself, not to what it needs to clarify.

We must be very careful not to handicap either ourselves or the students by trying to discover every allusion. The imagery and the symbolism of a poem will safely lead us to the understanding of the meaning. It seems reasonable to suggest to the students that they ought to be able to find sufficient justification from the total texture of the poem, in order to come to a conclusion on the meaning. Perhaps the instructor could suggest at this point that a poem, content and form creates an aesthetic effect as a whole, like any other art form, like a piece of music or a painting; that an aesthetic experience should be expected along with an emotional and rational experience.

The toughest part of teaching is teaching the distinction between good and bad poetry. The students naturally feel insecure in this territory. They ought to be exposed to as great a number of poems as possible, yet sophistication in this may only be acquired over years of exposure to and study of poetry along with its theory and criticism.

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