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Modern Poetry in the Classroom

CONDUCTED BY THE NCTE COMMITTEE ON THE READING AND STUDY
OF POETRY IN HIGH SCHOOL*

NAMING OF PARTS**

Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
We had daily cleaning. And tomorrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But today,
Today we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens,
And today we have naming of parts.

This is the lower sling swivel. And this
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see,
When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel,
Which in your case you have not got. The branches
Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent gestures,
Which in our case we have not got.

This is the safety-catch, which is always released
With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me
See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy
If you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms
Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see
Any of them using their finger.

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this
Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it
Rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this
Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards
The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:
They call it easing the Spring.

They call it easing the Spring: it is perfectly easy
If you have any strength in your thumb: like the bolt,
And the breech, and the cocking-piece, and the point of balance,
Which in our case we have not got; and the almond-blossom
Silent in all of the gardens and the bees going backwards and forwards,
For today we have naming of parts.

—Henry Reed

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**From *A Map of Verona and Other Poems*, copyright, 1947, by Henry Reed. Reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. and Jonathan Cape, Ltd.

Point of Balance: A Lesson in "Naming of Parts"

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Henry Reed's modern lyric on a war-time lesson speaks directly, I have found, to the high school boys and girls of today. On first encounter they respond to its ironic tone and alternating rhythms, and sense its implied theme. Why then should I suggest that students and teacher do more than read the poem together? Because of its special appeal, "Naming of Parts" stimulates an interest on the part of adolescents to discover how the poet has used language to achieve his purpose. Even a limited discussion of this poem, moreover, compels us to consider the poet's use of two verbal approaches to experience: the direct language of practical discourse, the hard words of the Army; and the sensuous diction of emotional response, the soft words of the Spring. And in exploring how and why he employs these two distinct voices, we are led to a closer look at the set of opposing images unleashed in each stanza and thus to a clearer understanding of the point of balance pursued in the poem.

The poem, we first note, is the reaction of an army recruit to what he hears and sees. The first three lines of each stanza, except those of the final stanza, present the instructor's lesson in the nomenclature of the Lee Enfield (an English rifle similar to the American Springfield). It is important to recognize that while the lesson moves from part to part, at no point does it progress from nomenclature to function: stanza one introduces the piecemeal approach of the instruction; stanza two names the upper and lower swivels, but without sling and piling swivel the trainee cannot be told how to carry or stack his rifle; stanza three takes up the proper procedure for releasing the safety-catch without explaining its purpose; and stanza four expresses the same concern for aimless naming of the

loading and firing mechanism. The vocabulary of the lesson is limited and unimaginative, the statements are repetitious and halting, and the cumulative effect of the voice on recruit and reader is one of boredom. Because he has selected only those aspects of the lesson which would appear disconnected and meaningless, the poet makes the lesson appear to have no more significant objective than the naming of parts—some of which the soldiers lack, all of which are unexplained—of an instrument for destroying life.

Now let us see what the trainee is doing as the lesson proceeds. Awkwardly holding his gun (the branches hold "silent, eloquent gestures, which in our case we have not got"), he goes through the motions demanded of him. But like that of many another reluctant pupil caught in the hour of spring, his attention is elsewhere. In general, it is focused on a cultivated area, "the neighboring gardens," and in particular on one species of bush, the *Prunus japonica* or flowering almond. The recruit's observations are developed by a second voice which begins after the caesura in the fourth line and flows through the fifth line of each stanza. In every instance this second voice is triggered by the manual of arms lesson, but it is characterized by an emotive and sensuous diction which serves to create sharply defined images centering on the blossoms of the seed-bearing plant. In the first stanza the new voice, like a good student's, begins with the scientific (and romantic) name of the plant but immediately reveals its freshness and color; in succeeding stanzas this voice discovers the meaningful shape and stance of the branches (perhaps open-armed or gracefully beckoning), the delicately weightless and still quality of the expectant blossoms, and finally (in an implied com-

parison with the trainees) the warlike and awkward action of the early bees engaged in their purposeful task. The sixth line always picks up a phrase from the lesson to form an ironic comment which links and enlarges the sense of both voices.

In these stanzas the poet has made use of two voices, we find, to single out a series of images set in opposition between the mechanized and the natural worlds: pointless talk against pregnant stillness; the cold, colorless rifle against the warm, colorful blossom; the awkward motions of the soldier against the eloquent gestures of the branches; the mechanical manipulations against the natural processes. The fifth stanza organizes echoes and images from the preceding stanzas into a final expanded perception for the reader. One should be wary here of demanding a paraphrase or of extracting "The message." Some classes will want to consider the further extensions of meaning released in these lines; others will be unwilling or unable to attempt a closer reading without loss of interest. I seek a point of balance, trusting that an enjoyable experiencing of the poem will lead some students at least to reading and reflecting on their own.

Placing "Naming of Parts" into some meaningful context for eleventh or twelfth grade students will ensure a more favorable response. For example, one might read it along with other poems dealing with reactions to war, perhaps in comparison with Wilfred Owens' "Arms and the Boy" or in contrast to Amy Lowell's "Patterns," or one might compare and contrast the point of view in the poem with one of Stephen Crane's short stories or certain episodes in *The Red Badge of Courage*. During the period in which my students and I study the poem, I give each student a copy for his personal notations. Before the first reading we might exchange impressions on the significance of spring and the effects of spring on classroom concentration. Then the students are asked to read

through the poem to identify the lesson and the "classroom" in the poem. After this reading, we may need to call upon various volunteers to clarify words like *japonica*, *coral*, *eloquent*, and *assault*. A few minutes on the parts of the rifle will help those girls—and boys—who have never handled a rifle to visualize the lesson. Some experienced student will usually be happy to explain the parts from a picture or chalkboard sketch. This necessary digression, however, should be brief lest it, too, become a lesson in naming of parts.

As the next step, I ask the students to listen for the two voices as I read the poem to them. (If one is fortunate enough to have available the recording of *An Album of Modern Poetry*,¹ Henry Reed will read his lines for the class.) In the discussion that follows I avoid making any statements about the poem. If, as teachers, we wish to sharpen the students' understanding and to heighten their appreciation, we must be willing to allow for free discussion, controlled only by reference to the words and lines of the poem. I try, therefore, to ease them into the poem: When does the experience take place (season, time of day)? Where is it occurring (place, circumstances)? Who is speaking as the poem opens? To whom is he speaking? Do we detect another voice in the poem? Whose voice is it? What helps us distinguish between the two voices? How do we know where one stops and the other begins? Once we have clearly established the setting and the two voices, we can begin to explore the poem by asking questions suggested by the above discussion.

The extent and depth of the discussion depend upon the previous experiences as well as the present abilities in the class,

(Continued on Page 577)

¹*An Album of Modern Poetry*, An Anthology Read by the Poets, Twentieth Century Poetry in English, three 12" LP records, 33 $\frac{1}{2}$ rpm, \$13.50, produced by Library of Congress Recording Laboratory, Washington, D. C.

ations of purpose, content, and method. These three aspects of teaching English are integrated in each of the five main sections: Language, Thought and Feeling, Understanding, Appreciation, Communication, and Values. Following each of these five sections is at least one complete, illustrative unit on such themes as: Power over Language (Grade Seven), Science Fiction: Radar of Man's Curiosity (Grade Nine), *Macbeth* (Grade Eleven), and the Consequences of Character (Grade Twelve).

The twelve chapters also relate purpose, content, and method. Each one presents the point of view in an introduction, and then approaches the teacher's problem in three steps: designing the curriculum, suggested learning experiences, and evaluating progress.

The sections dealing with language and communication are possibly of greatest interest and timeliness. Their practical, both-feet-on-the-ground approach to concepts about language as process, and to the modifications of traditional concepts of grammar in terms of modern linguistic science is highly illuminating. In keeping with their basic philosophy of integrated teaching, the authors relate all such study to the basic objective—power over language.

Into a short, meaty section is tucked an enlightening discussion of one of the most difficult and demanding problems teachers face, either as individuals or as members of groups. That is the designing of over-all programs and plans. Suggestions are flexibly

set up for organizing a six-year program, a one-year program, a single unit, and a single lesson. Spelled out helpfully are techniques and strategy for integrating the many strands of English into orderly designs in which the various complex segments complement, support, and enrich each other.

The use of charts, graphs, tables, outlines, and similar devices to summarize and point up significant ideas, learning sequences, and procedures help the reader organize his thinking as he reads. So, too, do the changing type faces and side headings.

Generous, but not overwhelming, annotated bibliographies follow each chapter. A composite listing of the films, filmstrips, recordings, and books mentioned throughout the text bears incidental testimony to its scope, and indicates the sources of the material.

Almost encyclopedic in its range, the book is readable and interesting. Although its tone is scholarly and professional, it is neither remote nor pedantic.

Teaching Language and Literature is an excellent tool and reference text for curriculum committees and study groups, but more importantly for teachers of English themselves—for the less experienced teachers whose professional insights will be broadened and deepened, and for the more experienced teachers whose professional batteries will be vigorously recharged.

—M. AGNELLA GUNN

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Point of Balance: A Lesson in "Naming of Parts"—

(Continued from page 571)

but in any case the period should not end without a final reading of the poem. "One does not take a poem apart for the love of dissection," John Ciardi reminds us, "but only in order to put it back

together more meaningfully."² If the discussion has been a successful one, the class will have two ready volunteers to read aloud the voices in the poem. As a final fillip, a chalkboard list of other works by Henry Reed may encourage some students to seek further experiences with his poetry.

²John Ciardi, *How Does a Poem Mean?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), p. 779.