Studying Poetry

To Leonie Kramer

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Preface

The purpose of this book is to provide a comprehensive guide to the study of poetry in English for senior secondary pupils and undergraduates and their teachers. Poetry is often regarded by students of literature as the least approachable of the literary genres. The complexities and compression of its language, the elusiveness of its meaning and the artificiality of its forms combine, for many readers, to prevent both the understanding and enjoyment of a poem. This is profoundly regrettable, for poetry represents not only an extraordinary testament to human creativity, but an incomparable treasury of insights into and interpretations of the human condition, in all its variety of experience. ‘Poetry is the honey of all flowers’, wrote Thomas Nashe in the sixteenth century, ‘the quintessence of all sciences, the marrow of wit, and the very phrase of angels’. Poets confront us and delight us, as another of them—Alexander Pope—has testified, with ‘what oft was thought, but ne’er so well expressed’.

This book is addressed to a specific audience of those completing English studies at school or pursuing the study of poetry further at college and university. More specifically, it is a response to perceptions of difficulties that students of mine and of colleagues are encountering when required to discuss literary texts, whether in class or in their essays. The most significant of these are problems associated with the ‘close reading’ of a poem—the explication of the text, thematically and stylistically—and with appreciating the importance of setting literary texts, such as poems, in various contexts: historical, biographical, aesthetic and so forth.

There are various explanations for these difficulties. Certainly, a lack of instruction in the technical aspects of language inhibits both textual analysis and its lucid explanation and expression: if we are to describe and evaluate a poet’s use of language, it is easier if we have familiar terms and concepts to hand, which the formal study of grammar provides. This

book cannot fill this need, but I hope that in the use of elementary grammatical and other technical terms, I can demonstrate both their simplicity and the need to apply them to the discussion of poetry.

Then there is insufficient knowledge, today, of the broad outline of British and European history and cultural evolution. This restricts the reading of texts that have arisen from (and have often been influential upon) those circumstances and developments. *Studying Poetry* aims to introduce the periods of history which are relevant to the understanding and appreciation of the cultural heritage to which English literature belongs.

There are the more practical problems, too, arising from the vanishing discipline of reading literary texts which require sustained attention and, indeed, re-reading. The ‘instant gratification’ provided by other media—most notably, television—does not accustom the mind to the concentration which poetry requires in order to yield its profound rewards. In reading numerous texts in close detail, I emphasise the need for this process and the stimulation which it provides.

In some quarters of modern philosophical and socio-political theory—which has had a significant impact on English studies—there is opposition to the appreciation of a text as a literary work of art, rather than as a polemical tract. Poetry in particular has suffered in this regard as it is the most highly-wrought of literary forms, the most ‘artistic’.

Associated with this opposition is a revulsion from the aesthetic component of literature. John Keats’s equation of beauty with truth is rejected. Poetry is too often read for what (if anything) it has to teach us about a philosophical or sociological issue, in ignorance of how it says it and the appreciation and evaluation of that mode of saying. ‘What do you learn from *Paradise Lost*?’ Thomas De Quincey asked in his essay on ‘Alexander Pope’ in 1848. ‘Nothing at all.’ What we learn, in fact, is that it is the expression of a poet which provides the reader with unique kinds of enjoyment, emotionally and intellectually. Studying poetry begins (and, in a sense, ends) with the recognition of this truth: that a poem is a poem, as T. S. Eliot argued, and ‘not another thing’.

In this book, I have had to be selective in a number of matters. Its timeframe is the so-called ‘modern’ period in history, from 1500 to the present—the period of my own teaching experience and research interests. Many of the poets (although by no means all) to whom I refer or discuss in detail are English-born and male. They have been significant in our

evolving literary culture. Wishing, for racial and sexual reasons, for example, that this were not so does not alter their significance. We need not automatically agree with Samuel Johnson's statements that Shakespeare is 'above all writers ... the poet who holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life' and that Milton's *Paradise Lost*, 'with respect to design, may claim the first place, and with respect to performance, the second, among the productions of the human mind', or with Harold Bloom's (and other commentators') assessment of Dr Johnson himself as the greatest of critics. But it could be argued that the need to study these writers and their works is urgent precisely because they fail to endorse the views of today. Matthew Arnold believed that poetry was a 'criticism of life' and Milton, in his own time as in our own, presents a challenging assessment of it. He was, as Percy Bysshe Shelley affirmed, 'a bold inquirer into morals and religion'. However this is different from asserting that Milton's poetry is merely didactic: 'nothing can be equally well expressed in prose', Shelley continues, 'that is not tedious and supererogatory in verse'. 'We hate poetry', Keats wrote in a letter, 'that has a palpable design upon us'.

Yet, we should not censor the unique ways in which poetry can question and disturb our presuppositions, particularly when it is the creation of writers from societies and with philosophies of life far removed from our own. We should certainly resist the temptation to remake and rewrite such poems in our image. Dr Johnson loathed Milton's politics and religion and had little regard for his character, but this did not prevent him from recognising the genius of his poetry which included Milton's convictions and personality. One of the greatest rewards of the study of poetry is the insight it gives into the human experience in lives and ages so different from ours.

However, the established curricula of English studies have been, to an extent, restrictive. In order to indicate the richness and diversity of the English poetic heritage, I have frequently moved beyond the 'canonical' writers in this study. I have made references to important women poets and to several significant writers from the 'New World'.

The special studies of individual poets in the book's second section may appear conventional. But again we are confronted with a selection of poets who are at once representative and distinctive. Their marks of genius should scarcely be regretted by those who study literature. In

reading their poems in detail, I strive to demonstrate why these writers have been regarded as the best and the brightest of their generations, although not always, of course, during their own lifetimes. Generally speaking, it is the unique combination of their 'voice' and their vision.

Whether to begin (as I have) with the section on 'Reading Poetry' or on the historical periods of literature is arbitrary. Readers may choose to reverse this order according to their requirements. To prioritise 'Reading Poetry', however, has this justification: the skills referred to there are universally applicable.

I speak deliberately of 'skills', for the study of poetry is a discipline and it is wise to understand its basic techniques before pursuing it further. It is pertinent to compare it with the study of music as the two have much in common: the identification of a theme, the mastery of a rarefied notation, of matters of rhythm and tone, and so on. While a musical piece may be enjoyed immediately, at a certain level, and by those without any technical knowledge in the art, that appreciation is widened, deepened and made available to others once the technical terminology and its application have become familiar. In stressing the need to acquire literary-critical skills and techniques in the reading of poetry, I would argue against the notion that appreciating a poem is merely a matter of a subjective response and of 'taste'. It is not a science (*pace* I. A. Richards), but nor should it be restricted to the excitement of an individual sensibility. Ultimately, the study of poetry is, as T. S. Eliot suggested, 'the common pursuit of true judgment'.

More mundanely, examinations and essay-writing need to be addressed. Accordingly, I have punctuated the text with examples of the kinds of questions that are asked and assignments that are set in these circumstances. I am often puzzled by the revulsion—for example, of poets themselves—from this aspect of reading poetry, as if it were disreputable. The formal study of harmony and counterpoint and the examining of music students in those procedures enriches their appreciation of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. Similarly, an assignment on the use of metaphor in George Herbert or a question on Christina Rossetti's lyricism, arising out of a study of those matters in the broad reading of their poetry, should refine rather than dampen our enthusiasm for those writers. Of course, poetry is not written so that examinations can be taken in its discussion or essays written about it. It is meant to be enjoyed:

All art [wrote Friedrich Schiller] is dedicated to Joy, and there is no higher and no more serious problem, than how to make men happy. The right art is that alone, which creates the highest enjoyment.

But the enjoyment of a complex art such as poetry comes from knowledge about it and it is a fact of educational life that the testing of knowledge concentrates the mind in the acquisition of that knowledge.

In any case, if it were not for the compulsory study of poetry in secondary schools, very few people today would ever encounter it. Some, no doubt, are put off poetry for life by that experience. Many more are at least acquainted with the possibility of its pleasure. The seed is sown and has the chance of growing into informed appreciation. Poetry is such an important expression of our humanity that it needs to be made as widely available as possible.

At the end of the book are a glossary of literary terms and historical tables for reference.

The purpose of this book will have been achieved if students and teachers find it helpful in enriching their reading of poems and if they experience even a portion of the pleasure I have derived, in writing it, from revisiting and discovering these poets.

I am grateful for the initial interest in the project of Peter Debus, Publishing Director of the Tertiary Division of Macmillan Education Australia, and his subsequent encouragement and advice as the book took shape. During the writing I received helpful advice from my colleagues in the Department of English at the University of Sydney—in particular, Bruce Gardiner, Bernard Martin, Anthony Miller, Noel Rowe, Catherine Runcie, Vivian Smith and Michael Wilding.

The book is dedicated, with respect and affection, to the Chancellor of the University of Sydney, Dame Leonie Kramer, who, in a series of lectures on William Blake more than a quarter of a century ago, was the first of several university teachers to reveal to me the challenges and the rewards of the study of poetry.