

JUDITH WRIGHT

A LETTER TO PETER ABOTOMEY AND NOEL MACAINSH

I found your articles in the first issue of Vol 6 (1978) interesting in many ways. Perhaps I should apologise, Peter, to you and the pigeons of your Australian Literature class for having put the cat among you in so distressing a way. But no, I don't think I should. If you had read the essays in the first section of *Because I was Invited* ('Mainly about Poetry'), you would have been amply forewarned on my views, or most of them, on Academe vs. Poetry. As for talking about my own poetry, it is I would have thought notorious by now that I avoid this as far as humanly possible.

Not only because I don't believe in the way poetry is taught in schools and universities (a position I have held ever since my poems began to be set for examinations, and I began to get the letters from students and teachers alike, which I mention in those essays), but also because I found, in my first innocent excursions into talking to schools which had invited me to speak, that the object was to get better marks for the students in public examinations. I was expected to give personal 'tips,' insights denied to those schools which I didn't visit — and this on a non-paid basis, to be nastily mercenary as well as unco-operative. The rewards of talking to schools, I found, came from talking straight about poetry itself to students who for the first time perhaps began to see that poetry might be a living art and not a school subject. But the teachers hardly welcomed what I had to say.

Now, to turn to the question of what you, Noel, call the dilemma of poetry today — the "dualism of 'pure' and expedient poetry." I think this dualism has been encouraged, if not actually set in train, by the present structure and assumptions of the teaching of literature. It's a point I go into further in another address to English teachers, which is to be published soon in *Australian Literary Studies*, so I won't elaborate it here. However, I think it is true to say that poets, like anyone else, can be corrupted by the demands of audiences, and the only audience they may get nowadays is that 'educated class' which, perhaps with some optimism, you feel is being turned out by tertiary education in literature. (*Do* students of English, having passed their final examinations, actually "desire literary experiences corresponding to (their) cultural habituation"? I am not so sure; nor do the sales of poetry correspond to the number of past students of English, who by now must number many thousands. If a poet gets a first edition of a thousand of any of his books, he exults.) However, knowing that if he hits the educational jackpot it will be because his poems are regarded as worthy educational pabulum, the poet *may* just be tempted, or intimidated, into elaborating the poem in that direction, with or without tongue in cheek. I wouldn't like to argue this in detail — perhaps it might turn out

to be a fruitful field for a thesis or two? — but I did point to this possibility long ago, as a danger in the use of poetry in education. Who wants to be dismissed as unworthy of the consideration of student audiences?

One thing is certain: Brennan, not Shaw Neilson, is the kind of poet students are asked to study. There is little ore for research and literary analysis in Neilson: Brennan is a never-failing mine. To me, however, it is Neilson who is the 'pure' poet — Brennan might better be described as 'mandarin.'

I said 'educational jackpot.' Once this was true — one's sales skyrocketed when a book was set for school or university study. It is true no longer. Neither poets nor publishers get much out of that jackpot now, since universities and education departments have set their faces against paying the poets even a licence fee for the privilege of unlimited photocopying of their property. Why, we reason, should we be eager to be processed, criticised and lectured upon in the interests of well-paid academics, when we get so little out of it, and when the sales of poetry to those 'educated' past students are so low? Why, for that matter, should publishers, who are also a beleaguered class from the economic point of view, print us at all? Indeed, only the subsidies they get for doing so probably keep us in print now.

Meanwhile, what Noel calls the 'uneducated' regard poetry as a mere exercise in education anyway. We have lost both our possible audiences in the interests of education.

The fact that there is a growing movement among poets not only away from the kind of poetry that is set in the syllabus, but also into 'oral' or 'performance' poetry, has a lot to do with this fact of life. Maybe to become a wandering minstrel is one answer to the problem of saving poetry and getting it back to those who no longer read. As to the immortality of the printed word, that is no longer a carrot. Who nowadays is confident of surviving next week's international crisis, let alone of bequeathing immortal verse to an audience a hundred years hence?

That *trahison des universités* which has resulted in "the academicians" teaching my poetry while they let the source of the symbols be "blown up" (and polluted and eroded and cut down and all the rest of it) of course goes further. As I said in another lecture printed in *Because I was Invited* ('Conservation and education: the responsibility of universities'), there is very little actual involvement either by universities or by scientists in the battles of conservationists. (There are honourable exceptions.) This is another cause of disenchantment among the young with educational institutions. While you may argue that it is not for English teachers to involve themselves in questions which are political, economic and scientific, the fact remains that when a poem which does have a bearing on human reactions and communications is taught as though it were a mere verbal construction, the disenchantment spreads into your own field.

I leave the argument to you — though I hardly feel, Noel, that the process of embodying "the latest findings of linguistics, semiology, and

other disciplines" in the teaching of literature as communication is going to do much to assist our various parlous plights, at this stage. The reason I am writing this letter is that I do feel a bit indignant over your accusation that I am indulging in "a belated scramble to get back on the right side of the fence." If my "nerves are cracking" over what is happening to poetry in the hands of educationists, they have been doing so for many years — look at the dates of those essays in *Because I was Invited*, if nowhere else. Do English lecturers never read anything but what they have to teach?

Which brings me to Peter's distress over my choosing to talk to his class on James Baxter — a poet who moved out of formal and classical verse into what Peter calls 'pop,' but I would prefer to call directly communicative verse, but whose real sin seems to be that Peter had not heard of him, and that he is a New Zealander. Baxter happens to be a fine poet in both genres, and if we don't know of him here, so much the worse for us. As a rebel against the "dead hand of English departments" he is also a good example of what I was talking about. My talk (which was a more or less unscheduled one at Peter's request) can't of course be embodied in his class's syllabus, but I thought it worth while to draw at least some attention to the fact that our nearest English-speaking neighbour also has poets worth thinking about, and that there, as here, things are happening to poetry which ought to give food for cogitation. Maybe it will be difficult for English departments to start setting 'socially relevant' verse in the syllabus; but as Noel recognises, "the meaning of literature cannot be confined to the framework of traditional poetics and aesthetics."

As a final afterthought, neither the grammar nor the context of what I said indicates that I think the 'uneducated' class is 'nobody.' Maybe sheep who get tired of looking up and not being fed are justified in leaving the fold altogether.

Yours, as a Cassandra old in prophecy and protest,

Judith Wright