

Daffodils and Stones in the Classroom

A Report of a Teacher's «Partisan Experiment»

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Those of us, who have taught English literature, for example, the «Introduction to English Literature» course at various English Departments for several decades, will understand that teaching the same material year after year might become, to put it softly, somewhat monotonous. It is only by introducing new methods and new material that we can refresh and revitalize our teaching.

When I was to teach this course for probably the fifteenth time in the fall semester of the academic year 2000-2001 both at the Catholic and the Protestant Universities in Hungary, I, like everybody else, divided the course-material into poetry, drama and epic or narrative. Among the poems to be discussed in the lecture-course I chose *I Wandered Lonely («Daffodils»)* by the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850).

However, this time I decided to entertain myself by breaking the monotony of teaching. I found myself doing what I am calling now a «partisan experiment». Let me emphatically repeat: not only an «experiment» but a «partisan» one.

At both Universities I gave a home assignment for the members of my lecture classes. Two poems were given them for comparison. One was Wordsworth's poem and another one by someone I called «An Unknown Poet» with the title *The Song of the Stones*. I am quoting here both of them.

William Wordsworth

*I wandered lonely as a Cloud
(Daffodils)*

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

«The Unknown Poet»

The Song of the Stones

When I met a squirrel, so sweet
I heard a ring under my feet
It was a chant or song
But it didn't last long
When I heard the Song of the Stones

Daffodils and Stones in the Classroom

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had
brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

The stones were living, singing, dancing
They were jumping, hopping, prancing
The stones were happy, young celebra-
ting
But still so old, that there's no dating
I can hear the Song of the Stones

As the time flies like a bee
There're so many years I can't see
The days have changed, the sun has gone
But the light of the stones will glow on
And I can still hear the Song of the
Stones.

Upon receiving the poem of «The Unknown Poet», most students at both places rushed to the junior faculty members to ask them for cues or ideas concerning the identity of the author. They wanted to know whether he was a contemporary romantic figure with Wordsworth or a more modern poet. Unfortunately, all my colleagues were at a loss: they had to reveal their embarrassment and ignorance to the students. Strangely enough, these colleagues did not approach me with the question concerning the identity of the author. Luckily, I would say, because thus I did not find myself in the uncomfortable position whether or not to betray the top secret sealed by seven seals, which, lo and behold, is being opened now: that the poem was written by my then-11-year-old son Felix Fabiny, a sixth-grader of the American International School of Budapest. It was the decision of the author and of the family-council that the identity of the poet should not be uncovered lest the students felt to have been cheated or lest their teacher should have been found guilty of paternal pride, a peculiar version of one of the seven deadly sins.

I am aware of the enterprise having been ethically dubious, or, rather, as I said, a «partisan» one. It is my hope, however, that one day the students will pardon my mischief as a Puck or a Prospero were also pardoned after some unpleasant adventures.

The Findings

Yes, it has not only been a partisan but a somewhat unusual experience to amuse myself, or, ourselves, at the essays of these poor tortured souls, just as Theseus amused himself according to the notorious lines of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: «Our sport shall be to take what they mistake.» (V.1.90) Much to the credit of the 11-year-old poet, he just looked into the file of essays, smiled at some of the formulations and then gave it back, never asking to see these comments again.

One must mention, first of all, concerning the context of these texts, that students at both universities were asked to write the comparison of the two poems within the frame of a lecture course with the remark that everybody had to submit the essays but no grading would be given. I did not even promise to return the papers. Nor did I give any deadline as a date of submission. First year students are, however, generally conscientious thus most of them indeed submitted their essays. There were altogether fifty eight pieces in my file and having re-read all of them I could formulate some generalizations. In my first part (i.e. five points) I shall be concerned solely with the reception of *The Song of the Stones* while my last point will be devoted to the comparisons and value-judgements.

1) All of them took the poems very seriously: both the one by Wordsworth and the one by «The Unknown Poet». Not a single one of them suspected to have been hoaxed.

2) They had to write their essays after I had given three lectures on the «Figures of Meaning» and the «Figures of Sounds» and their analyses were packed with a quantitative enumeration of hosts of metaphors, symbols, similes, paradoxes, prosopopeia, chiasms, synchdoches, oxymorons and so on. They demonstrated to have learned the lesson and recognized these figures of meaning, and even identified meter and versification, if there was any. Concerning the strange versification of *The Song of the Stones* somebody noticed:

«pebbles are so different from each other that they couldn't get uniform clothes like those flowers could. Anyway, the second poem's stones (which are alive!) are hopping as follows: aabbc. The isosyllabic meter can be detected easily, but I can't find meter among the scattered «Stonehenges» of past days.» (50¹)

3) As for the author of *The Song of the Stones* there were many guesses. In most cases the author was a suspect romantic, a contemporary of

¹ The numbers in brackets indicate the numbers of the essays for my private use.

Wordsworth. Some of the students even used some scholarly methods, causal arguments by appealing e.g. to «nature-worship», the speaker being a «lonely man» etc. to prove their hypotheses. The idea of the «loneliness» was however denied by another critic:

«But this second poet is not alone. He met a squirrel which is not his company but represents the other occupants of the earth.» (43)

One student, however, suspected that the poet had lived before the romantic age:

«Maybe the writer was also a romantic poet but he lived earlier and his romantic images are not so complex. This poem is rather a song in which he tells us a sweet story.» (21)

As for the age of the author somebody even proposed that the author must have been an old man. The student wrote as follows:

«In my opinion, this poem was written, in the poet's old days, when people start worrying about age and death, and if so, then it is understandable why the stones were of such big importance.» (24)

My paternal feelings became thereby converted into the proper Wordsworthian pattern: «the child is the father of the man».

4) Several papers noticed the thematic concern of *The Song of the Stones* with «time» or temporality and the topic's close association with the structure of the poem.

«The Song of the Stones» contains the idea of disclaiming the power of time and some contradictions about it. Stones themselves are usually symbols of constancy, and they are dead things, but in this case they are alive and «young». After this surprising image the poet relates their other feature, that they are very old and timeless, thus there is an opportunity existing to find something unaltered among the changes of time. That is the main paradox of this poem.» (34)

Temporality is related to the division of the poem:

«The poet creates a simile about time when he says it flies like a bee. We can also realize another division: sound, movement and light. The number three plays an important role in the poem; it means harmony in the world of literature.» (36)

Another analyst wrote: «And time is shown in the circle, too, especially the infinity of time» (38) Somebody else perceived that

«The way the poem is built up is very interesting: each stanza shows a certain time, the first is about the past, the second is about the present, and the third one is about the near future.» (42)

Tibor Fabiny

5) As for the atmosphere of *The Song of the Stones*, some very interesting remarks were made. For example:

«So, the second poem is more pessimistic, we may say it sends forth an atmosphere of coming death. Although he hears the song of the stones in the future too, this song is already the music of the next world.» (37)

For another perceptive critic the poem evoked some biblical images:

«What do you think when you hear mountains jumping and stones singing? For me the whole poem had different meaning through the glass of the Bible; however it is evident that the poem has nothing to do with religion and God, but only with calm and kind natural wonders. Contrary to this let's try to reanalyse the poem by knowing the psalm: «The mountains skipped like goats / the hills jumped about like lambs.» (33)

Although I am sure the author was not familiar with the quoted psalm, concerning the next parallel I could easily provide some evidence of the «anxiety of influence». The ballet associated by our next critic has undoubtedly been a favourite one of the poet:

«The Song of the Stones reminds me of the ballet of The Nutcracker somehow. The vision of the diving, singing, dancing stones is quite contradictory because the stones are heavy objects but the concept of dancing is something very light. The first stanza of the poem is a narrative talk about how the writer walks in the forest and suddenly realizes a strange voice. It reminds me of a fairy tale. The second verse tells about a motion how the stones start to dance while the poet stands amazed. In the third stanza the poet talks about the impression the sight of the dancing stones made on him.» (23)

Let us eventually turn to the comparisons themselves and their inherent value-judgements.

1. Similarities

Most students recognized the similarity of the situations.

«I wandered lonely as a cloud» and «The Song of the Stones» are both related to nature: they reflect the enthusiasm and desire of romanticism suggested by Rousseau to return to the original environment that is not spoiled by the human race yet.» (34)

Another critic found:

«Both poets wrote a certain ode to nature in their poems, they definitely found peace and silence in observing it. The first poem is longer, the second shorter. Nevertheless, both have a strict structure: meeting nature, enjoying its presents, being one with it and keeping the experience for oneself.» (53)

2. The «Sight» of the Daffodils and the «Sound» of the Stones

Interestingly enough, two papers noticed differences in similarities by Wordsworth's appeal to a visual, and «The Unknown Poet's» appeal to acoustic experience:

«while the first work is full of visual images («I saw a crowd»), the second is characterized by auditory («Song of the Stones») and also visual images («the stones were jumping»). The lifeless stones are also dancing, celebrating this picture and the sound touches the soul of the poet: («the time flies like a bee»).» (48)

The other comment was:

«The second poem approaches my senses, both my eyes and ears. I can see how the stones dance, jump, hop, prance, and «glow» as well as I can hear their song.» (49)

3. The Daffodils is Artistically Better than the Stones

Naturally, most of the 19-year-old (if not older!) students recognized the artistic superiority of Wordsworth's poem:

«In spite of the grand subject (of *The Song of the Stones*), the poem contains very common words, and, compared to Wordsworth's very eloquent and moving work, has no poetic energy at all. The lack of rhythm and poor rhyming distracts the attention from the subject, so the poem remains unimpressive.» (18)

A less strict observation sounds as follows:

«The Song of the Stones provides the reader with vivid movements through the description of the stones' dancing and jumping. These are simple emotions, not as deep as in the first poem and the mental pictures are not really merged with the vivid images.» (22)

Tibor Fabiny

Again, here is a more severe voice:

«The Song of the Stones» can be an imitation (?) of some sort but it's very weak, I think ... I did not understand how the squirrel comes into the picture and then came the stones and I couldn't find a connection between the two. There's no unity, no real connection between the images and no secondary meaning.» (44)

And last, a well-argued, balanced evaluation suggested:

«Wordsworth's poem is much longer, and somewhat more elaborate; he uses many words, rare expressions which make his poem more poetic. In a word, it stands on a higher level. «The Song of the Stones» is a simple, easily understandable product, expressing the same idea in a less developed way.» (40)

4. The *Stones* is Artistically Better than the *Daffodils*

To the great surprise of the teacher, there were some students who explicitly chose the *Stones* rather than the *Daffodils* as their favourite one. The «Nutmcracker»-analyst wrote:

«Personally, I preferred «The Song of the Stones» because it made a deeper impact on me, somehow I liked the soaring fantasy of the author and I liked that there was no overemphasized sadness in it.» (23)

The second one, while commenting on the auditory images, suggested the following:

«For me the most wonderful in this image is that in spite of the flight of time, the «Song of the Stones» can be heard, so it has a great and never-ending power, which will always be heard and felt. For me it is about the power of poetry.» (48)

Conclusions

Here ends the report on my experiment. It was indeed a partisan one with several aesthetic and ethical risks. This experiment was, first of all, an exercise in reception-aesthetics. How are poems received by university-students of English in their first year? Are students in a position to recognize the classic as classic with an A-level behind them? Can they tell a romantic poem from a poem by an 11-year-old boy of the very end of the 20th century? To what extent can students become independent from their school experience and

the personality of their teacher? Or, is the «anxiety of influence» so determining that they project their education and intellectual background entirely upon the poem of «The Unknown Author»? As we have seen from the responses being both elementary and original, there is much to be done in our pedagogy to train autonomous, courageous thinkers with aesthetic affinity and logical integrity.

Some ethical issues were also at stake in this experiment. Has a teacher the liberty to play such a game at the expense of his students? Is the identity of «The Unknown Author» to be revealed to them? If yes, in what circumstances? Is it not disturbing, if not boasting, to use one's own son for such an experiment? Should the maker of the experiment read this paper to «The Unknown Author» as well? Or let him remain in his innocence?

And at last some axiological issues. What makes a work of art to be of value? Should we say that the spontaneously written poem of the 11-year-old boy is absolutely of no value? Or, will he, as Wordsworth did, rewrite his poem in his ripened years? Let us assign it to our hopes! Whatever remains certain is Wordsworth's old wisdom: «the child is the father of the man.»

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