ESSAY

Herbert Sucks. Donne is a Pimp.

Why high school students are the best poetry critics.

BY BRIAN STAVELEY

In a recent issue of *Poetry* magazine, Kay Ryan mused, "Who can read [Gerard Manley] Hopkins's 'The Windhover' and not feel welling up inside a kind of giddiness indistinguishable from the impulse to laugh?" Well, every single one of my 11th-grade poetry students, for starters. "I don't have the slightest urge to laugh when I read anything by Hopkins," says Becca. "And why does she keep saying *we* and *us*?" Her comment is not unique. After reading Elizabeth Bishop's "Filling Station," a poem that ends with "Somebody loves us all," Sammy commented indignantly, "A: that's bullshit, and B: it sounds like something from Barney."

I find these responses funny if I happen to agree with the assessment. When the poem being trashed is one I cherish, it's more difficult. My students gave "Ode on a Grecian Urn" a score of 5.8 out of 10. In high school terms, that's an F. "To Autumn" earned a D+. "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" failed. Clearly they have not yet mastered the subtle art of grade inflation.

I like Keats, and when his poems get snubbed, I erect defenses. After a year of teaching these students, however, I'm starting to think that irreverence for poetic authority is vital to the appreciation of poetry. The more "professional" we become as readers, the more myopic we grow. Who else but a poet steeped in the craft could have asked Ryan's question without realizing its absurdity?

It would be easy to rescue Keats (and Ryan) by dismissing these kids as philistines, the mindless automatons of popular culture. But they aren't. Despite the fact that they didn't like Keats, they *did* like Berryman, and Wyatt, and Dickinson, and Donne. The list goes on.

They all chose this course on English-language poetry as an elective in their junior year of high school. Their reasons ranged from the elevated ("I've always wanted to read *Paradise Lost*") to the practical ("I play guitar, and I want to write cooler lyrics for my songs") to the solicitous ("I thought you wanted me to") to the downtrodden ("I didn't get my first choice"). While some were fired up about poetry, many openly admitted that they loathed the genre and signed up with the faint hope that they might learn to like it.

I teach at a high-pressure private day school in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I'm used to students working diligently, no matter how much they dislike a subject. I was nervous, though, the night before we began *Paradise Lost*. I wondered if I should start looking into other career paths. After all, here are lines from the opening:

> Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
> Of OREB, or of SINAI, didst inspire
> That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,
> In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth
> Rose out of CHAOS: Or if SION Hill
> Delight thee more, and SILOA'S Brook that flow'd
> Fast by the Oracle of God;

Nothing sets the teenage mind afire like gnomic references to the Hebrew scriptures couched in heavily enjambed lines of Latinate syntax. I need not have worried. Milton won them over. I did my best to illuminate shifts from Germanic to Latinate syntax, the perfect placement of a chiasmus, the flexibility of Milton's

pentameter, and the theological underpinnings of the poem. They thought these features were "cool," but what they *loved* was Milton's epic imagination, the scope of the drama, the complexity of the characters. By the time we concluded, the kids wanted to make T-shirts with Satan and the quote "Only in destroying I find ease / to my relentless thoughts." This year one of my students began a college essay, "I have a crush on Satan." They didn't just like the bits with Satan; they liked all of it. Sara even liked book 7, about the creation of the world, which I'm always tempted to skim.

If that wasn't enough to convince me that these kids appreciate poetry, there was their memorization assignment. Every week I required that they learn by heart 15 lines of poetry. They could choose easy poems (Blake) or hard poems (Eliot). I even allowed them to learn song lyrics, but not one did. Instead, the list included such trifles as "The Hollow Men," "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the first two books of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and countless sonnets by Donne, Hopkins, and others. One student chose William Carlos Williams's "This Is Just to Say," a 28-word poem, but was ridiculed so ruthlessly by the rest of the class—who, at that moment, took 45 seconds out of class to memorize the poem—that she ended up learning something else to avoid the taunting.

I was less encouraged when only a couple of kids liked George Herbert. After our customary discussion failed to kindle any admiration or awe, I stayed up half the night rereading most of "The Temple" and preparing a lecture. I never lecture. The kids listened politely to my best defense of my favorite poet, the only poet whose book sits always at my bedside, the only poet whose poems I read every week. They were unimpressed. Although they tried not to hurt my feelings, they just didn't really think Herbert was up to snuff. "Up to snuff," as I was to discover, means "as good as John Donne." In every end-of-year conference, the kids listed Donne as one of their favorite poets. "He's a *pimp,*" according to Hilary. Sammy holds a slightly more nuanced view: "I'm like, 'John, you're such an asshole.' But I mean, I love him." When asked to write her epitaph, Alex composed a single couplet:

> John Donne,
> Here I come.

I like Donne as much as the next guy, but I hadn't meant to start a cult. These responses suggest that students in the 21st century can still have an intense and dynamic relationship with poetry, even old poetry. There is real value and insight in the first impressions of readers who have no emotional stake in the subject, no axe to grind, no schooling to see past. I can't look at Herbert without hearing Eliot's voice in my head whispering, "Brilliant poetry. Brilliant." When my students read Herbert, they read nothing but Herbert.

I can trace my love of many of my favorite poets to the opinions of others. This doesn't invalidate that love, of course, but it does make me wonder what poets and poems I would gravitate toward if I had skipped my formal education. It makes me wonder if some of my favorite emperors are really wearing clothes.

* * *

The day after reading "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Daisy walked in the classroom exclaiming, "You didn't tell us it was a zombie poem!" I was a little unsettled. I consider myself an authority on zombies, zombie movies, and contingency plans for zombie attacks. I also know a little bit about Coleridge. I had never thought of "Ancient Mariner" as a zombie poem. Among my students, I was in the minority. They explained, as though to a somewhat slow child: "The sailors. They're zombies. They die. Then they get up and move around, but they can't think. That's what a zombie is." They had a point.

They had hit upon what would have been obvious to original readers of the poem: it fit the mold of a kind of writing popular at the time, German, gothic, and delightfully, even preposterously, horrible. As one reviewer wrote 20 years after its publication, it "appeared at a time when, to use a bold but just expression, with reference to our literary taste, 'Hell made holiday,' and 'Raw heads and bloody-bones' were the only

fashionable entertainment for man or woman."

Opinions and ideas accrete around a poem like barnacles on the hull of a ship until the thing can barely move. Consider these sentences from 20th-century criticism of Coleridge's poem: "Beres' psychoanalytic reading of The Mariner's symbolism suggests that Coleridge's psyche was characterized by an oral fixation resulting from a repressed conflict between love and hatred for his mother." Or: "Coleridge's distinction between Reason and Understanding is the basis for a hermeneutic framework which exploits the tension between signifier and signified." A good scouring is in order, and my students, I have discovered, are very good with a wire brush.

My students have reminded me that poetry needs to deliver the goods. This may sound obvious—no self-respecting reader of poetry would admit to poring over mediocre verse. As Hilary said, "There needs be the right equation between what you put into a poem and what you get out of it. I'm willing to put a lot of energy in, but I want something *awesome* in return." Matt prefers poetry that "makes [him] think a lot more about things, about life." Will just looks for "something magical."

I have spent countless hours plodding through things that were definitely not magical; most of Pound's "Cantos" spring to mind, or long portions of "The Faerie Queen" or hundreds of poems by Wordsworth, or 90 percent of the small magazines published today. I believed for years that Pound was one of my favorite poets. I own about 25 books by or about him. I discovered only recently, much to my chagrin, that I really like just a handful of his poems.

My high school students are willing to put down a Wordsworth poem halfway through just because, well, it's not that great. They don't want historically significant poetry, or metrically unusual poetry, or undiscovered poetry on which you might write a decent dissertation; they want *great* poetry. At a time when so many poets are fretting about the state of their art in our culture, this should be profoundly reassuring.