

“The Dying of the Light”

How Common Core Damages Poetry Instruction

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■ “The Dying of the Light”

Executive Summary

The fate of poetry in the school curriculum may seem like an odd subject for a Pioneer Institute report. But these are unusual times. It is not clear that the literary genre called poetry has a future in the face of a reduction in literary study that Common Core’s English language arts standards implicitly mandate—and in the context of Common Core’s drive for workforce development. Common Core claims the standards will prepare students equally for “college and career.”

To explore this unusual topic, Pioneer Institute asked three people whose professional background and experience complement each other. Anthony Esolen is a professor of English literature at Providence College. He is the editor and translator of three epic poems: Lucretius’s *On the Nature of Things*; Tasso’s *Jerusalem Delivered*; and, in three volumes, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Jamie Highfill, a grade 8 English teacher for 11 years in Fayetteville, Arkansas, was deemed Middle School English Teacher of the Year in 2011 by the Arkansas Council of Teachers of English Language Arts. She served from 1989-1994 in the United States Navy and is a veteran of the Gulf War. Sandra Stotsky, editor from 1991-1997 of *Research in the Teaching of English* (the major research journal published by the National Council of Teachers of English), was in charge of developing and revising the 2001 Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Framework.

This paper makes a case for why poetry study and recitation belongs prominently in the K-12 curriculum, despite Common Core’s workforce-oriented goals. In part I, Anthony Esolen discusses why students should read poetry at all, the kind of reading that poetry demands from us, and what poetry has to do

with the child’s developing imagination. In part II, Jamie Highfill explains how poetry has traditionally been taught in the public schools. In part III, Sandra Stotsky traces what is known from large-scale studies about the poetry curriculum in this country’s public schools. Part IV discusses how Common Core’s English language arts standards seem to be influencing the poetry curriculum in our public schools. Part V suggests what the fate of poetry in the school curriculum will likely be so long as Common Core’s standards and any tests based on them legally shape K-12 education and teacher training.

Introduction

The fate of poetry in the school curriculum may seem like an odd subject for a Pioneer Institute report. But we are struck by the absence of comments on what constitutes literary study in the schools from organizations that might be expected to have a professional interest in the school curriculum (e.g., National Council of Teachers of English, International Reading Association, Association of Supervisors and Curriculum Developers) and from higher education sources that might be expected to have a discipline-based interest in the topic (e.g., American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Modern Language Association).

We are especially concerned about the future for the literary genre called poetry in the face of a reduction in literary study that Common Core’s English language arts standards implicitly mandate—and in the context of Common Core’s drive for workforce development (the standards claim to prepare students equally for “college and career”). When these standards were adopted by state boards of education and governors in 2010, there were no reports of expressed concerns about changes in the balance between literary and non-literary content in

the English curriculum. Thus, it falls upon those few organizations with a consistent history of interest in the humanizing mission of the public school curriculum to explore what is happening with the nation's poetry curriculum.

The purpose of this paper is to make a case for why poetry study and recitation belongs prominently in the K-12 curriculum, despite Common Core's workforce-oriented goals. In part I, Anthony Esolen discusses why students should read poetry at all, the kind of reading that poetry demands from us, and what poetry has to do with a child's developing imagination. In part II, Jamie Highfill explains how poetry has traditionally been taught in the public schools. In part III, Sandra Stotsky traces what we know from large-scale studies about the poetry curriculum in this country's public schools. In part IV, we discuss how Common Core's English language arts standards seem to be influencing the poetry curriculum in our public schools. In part V, we suggest what we see as the fate of poetry in the school curriculum so long as Common Core's standards and any tests based on them legally shape K-12 education and teacher training.

I. Freedom and Poetry

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?

Think not of them, thou hast thy music too, –
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river shallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-cricket sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

John Keats, final stanza of "Ode to Autumn"

Why should a young person read a poem? Why should he read those lines from "Ode to Autumn"? We cannot answer that question without asking some more fundamental ones. What is a child? What is a child *for*? He shares life with all the other living creatures upon the earth. He eats and drinks, he moves about, he grows, he may bring others of his kind into the world. All these things he shares in common with cattle, dogs, birds of the air, fish of the sea. Yet we perceive that his life is more than food and drink and raiment. His cup runneth over. What is the life of his life?

It would seem odd, even mad, if someone were to say "I have a new and improved method of raising horses" without having first ascertained what horses are. It would hardly be sufficient if such a person, or a committee, or a bureaucracy flush with billions of dollars, were to assure us that they could tell the difference between a horse and a camel, that they once rode upon a horse in a parade, that they could spell the word, that they knew how much horse-meat could sell by the pound, and that they had received bids from a glue factory for so much tonnage of equine bones. We would be even more wary, and more ready to call the men from the home for the insane, if they should assure us that their single centrally-directed method must be applied to ponies on the Orkney Islands as well as to wild mustangs in the American plains and draft-horses on the steppes of Mongolia.

Yet what the madmen would do with, or to, that patient dumb animal with the slow sad eyes, the ideologues of education today would do with children all over America. They would strap them all onto the same treadmill, subjecting their teachers to the same overseers with the same conforming textbooks, computer files, databases, and

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standardized tests, now and forevermore. And they would do so without troubling to ask the questions we are asking. What is a child? What is a child *for*? What is the life of his life?

We shall make three interrelated assertions. The child, as well as the fully realized human person to which his education should aim, is meant *to be free*; he is meant *to behold what is good and beautiful and true*; and he is meant *to love it because it is so*.

None of these assertions is original to us. They are the common wisdom of men and women who have thought and written about education from ancient Greece to the present day. They are to be found, expressed in a variety of ways but true to the central vision nonetheless, in the pagan Plato and the Christian Newman, in the metaphysical Aquinas and the artistic Leonardo, in poets as diverse as the Christian Dante and the skeptic Arnold, and in educational reformers of our own age, such as Maria Montessori, John Senior, and Stratford Caldecott. Let us examine each assertion to see how a poetic education bears upon it, remembering always that to speak of one assertion is to speak also of the others.

A. Raising Children to be Free

The first assertion, that education should lead the child into the freedom of the human person, might appear uncontroversial. Everyone, it is assumed, desires freedom; but freedom, as modern man conceives it, is strangely extrinsic to the person. A man is free if he is guaranteed by the polity in which he lives the license to choose among an array of socially acceptable objects. These objects are presented to him by marketers, campaigners, and celebrities as desirable for this or that purpose, usually for fulfilling a physical or psychological appetite. The

appetites are taken as brute givens, not to be evaluated, much less to be curbed, denied, or redirected.¹ At best, modern man might say that freedom demands as its price the exercise of some lesser virtue, such as self-reliance (not burdening others needlessly) or tolerance (not feeling oneself burdened in turn). Neither those who call themselves conservative nor those who call themselves liberal recognize anything that freedom is *for*. It is apparently for nothing but what an individual wants.

That is essentially a materialistic and atomistic view of man, and one that reduces freedom to consumption. Man is cast as a *consumer of products* because he is himself a product, a thing. He is a unit in the masses, an atom in a welter of human stuff, and that human stuff, if it is to be managed, must be predictable. Hence we have seen in politics an obsession with the poll, essentially a machine for the manipulation of psychic *things*, silencing any deep concern for truth, even in the simple sense of a man’s clear and forthright statement of his intent. “Is it true, or good, or beautiful?” No one asks. Rather the question is, “Will it work upon the electoral mass for gaining this immediate end?”²

If we wish to talk about *human* freedom, we must talk about that which resists reduction, or the statistical tactics of marketers and bureaucrats. We must put substance back into our notion of freedom. The body needs blood. The mind and heart and soul need love.

If we are talking about freedom but not about love and beauty, then we have reduced freedom to a political license, defined by what the authorities cannot tell us we cannot have. Such a freedom by definition cannot be the goal of education because it has no content or meaning. But a freedom *for* what is good and beautiful does have content

and meaning. Such a freedom is won not by labor or techniques or the acquisition of marketable skills, but by a habit of mind that the philosopher Josef Pieper calls “leisure.”

Compared with the exclusive ideal of work as activity, leisure implies (in the first place) an attitude of non-activity, of inward calm, of silence; it means not being “busy,” but letting things happen. Leisure is a form of silence, of that silence which is the prerequisite of the apprehension of reality: only the silent hear and those who do not remain silent do not hear.³

Keats could not have written “Ode to Autumn” unless he too had listened to its silence and heard, with the ear and the heart and the mind, its sad and lovely songs. The poem is not a text to be manipulated by various techniques, so that the student may say clever things about it, to win admission to a prestigious school, for the satisfaction of physical and psychological lusts. It is too free for that.

Is such freedom – the inner freedom of a human soul, not the extrinsic license to indulge oneself in compulsions – really what *school* is for? Indeed, Pieper insists that it is above all what school is for. “One of the foundations of Western culture,” he says, “is leisure,” and “even the history of the word attests the fact; for leisure in Greek is *skole*, and in Latin *scola*, the English ‘school.’ The word used to designate the place where we educate and teach is derived from a word which means ‘leisure.’ ‘School’ does not, properly speaking, mean school but leisure.”⁴

School is a haven for knowing, not just *knowing about, in order to*, but sheer and beautiful knowing. The aim of a liberal education is not skill, for, as Pieper says, “a functionary is trained,” and training is concerned “with some one side or aspect of man,” for some utility to be gained.⁵ So we train electricians and carpenters, but only

as electricians and carpenters, not as human beings. But if we believe that human beings are meant to be free, and if we intuit, however vaguely in our ill-bred and ill-educated world, that a free soul aims to know what is true and good and to love it, then we will see that the “use” of the liberal or free arts is precisely that they transcend the category of the useful.

We do not read poetry so that we can write better office memoranda later on. That gets things exactly backwards. We must never reduce human art to laboratory objects, for writing essays on standardized tests or in college courses, extending the compulsions and feeding the cancer. We want instead fully realized human beings who will read poetry because it is beautiful and because it brings us knowledge of what is true, even if it is knowledge that can no more be used than a sunset or a kiss can be used.

We want human beings who will read good and great books, not burn them or grind them to intellectual pulp. For there is more than one way to destroy a book. Ray Bradbury, in his renowned dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451*, gives us a society in which books and the houses that hide them are burned by “firemen,” with most people reduced to the inanities of television and Fun Parks and incessant music on the radio. Bradbury wrote the novel during the height of the McCarthy investigations into the activities of communists, alleged and real, in the State Department and Hollywood; but the novel has very little to do with political censorship. It does not so much predict that, in the future, the Bible, Shakespeare, Johnson, and Keats will not be read, as it notices that right now they are not being read. The liberal arts have been dismissed as productive of strife – since they cannot be reduced to scientific consensus – and as economically useless. Thus it is no accident that the first person who brings the

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hero Montag out from the unreal world of machines and television is a young girl who resists the all-devouring claims of cradle-to-adulthood schooling:

“They want to know what I do with all my time. I tell them that sometimes I just sit and think. But I won’t tell them what. I’ve got them running. And sometimes, I tell them, I like to put my head back, like this, and let the rain fall in my mouth. It tastes just like wine. Have you ever tried it?”⁶

The girl thinks as she pleases, away from group projects and extracurricular activities and the staggering demands of work. We’re never told for certain that she reads books. But Bradbury presents her as very like people who read books. Montag will seek out an old professor who reads books, and who tells him that one of the three things necessary for true reading is *leisure*. That is not the same as time off. It is essentially a spiritual condition, keeping the real things of the world in their rightful place of honor, as do the hobos whom Montag meets in the end. These men preserve books by committing chapters of them to memory:

There was a silence gathered all about that fire and the silence was in the men’s faces, and time was there, time enough to sit by this rusting track under the trees, and look at the world and turn it over with the eyes.⁷

We want to raise children, fully human, whose hearts will be stirred by the heroism and the sanity of the true readers of books and cherishers of the world. They alone will be able to do what the formulas of the technocrat can never capture. They may or may not, as their inclinations lead them, pick through the staggering amount of information readily available today. But they will understand the difference between what is worth knowing and what is worthless. They will not be staggered by the avalanche of sludge because they need not be on that slope to begin with.

They need not wade through a thousand digitalized articles on the poetry of Keats. For the poetry of Keats is not a thing about which they gather information, as one would investigate the action of carotene in October leaves, or the effect of the earth’s tilt upon weather patterns in the north Atlantic. They have first the autumn itself, and the poem. These are the mysterious things they cherish.

B. The Free Arts are for All

Someone may object that such poetry may be for the well-to-do, but not for ordinary people who have to sweat and strain to make a living. It is a frill, a luxury which we can indulge only if we can afford it, but the “global economy,” that lumbering colossus, looms; and poetry will not help the prematurely aged college graduate make his way on the Exchange, or climb the slippery pole of Political or Managerial Ambition. So much less will it assist the plumber or the miner.

But that objection bespeaks an utter loss of hope and youth. It is tantamount to saying that we are not free. We must race “to the top” – the top of what, is never specified – or we will be cast adrift by the tides of some inexorable historical movement. In the midst of wealth that generations past would have considered princely, we race away from freedom and towards compulsions, and we assuage our consciences by telling ourselves that we have no choice.

But poetry, like music, like peaceful reflection, has always been for everyone. It has been man’s common heritage of song. It unites the old and the young; it binds across the generations, even the centuries. In *Doorways to Poetry*, Louis Untermeyer, writing to young people in praise of that most exalted of human arts, says that from the beginning of mankind to the present day the pulse of poetry

has never left us; it beats as strongly in the modern child as in the European cave-man and the prairie Indian. Long before they were written down, songs had the power to stir the senses of the listeners; and when today the lines leap from the printed page, our hearts are stirred and our pulses quicken with the same elemental excitement.⁸

A strange predicament indeed: when modern man with all his labor-saving machinery is less free for poetry than was the man who had to forage for his food every day, and poorer than our country poet Whittier, who cobbled shoes for mere cents, and wandered the flinty hills of New England, and wrote that a barefoot boy in those hills enjoyed a royal freedom:

Prince thou art – the grown-up man
Only is republican.⁹

But is such freedom fit for children? Don't children have to be warehoused and worked over until they are ready for the supposed "real world," a world of wage-earning, political noise, and sexual release? On the contrary, children are almost the only human creatures remaining who stand a chance of enjoying that freedom. It is especially for them.

When Untermeyer sees a child, he sees a free human being, free to love the wonders about him. He also sees a poet, for "no one is without imagination, emotion, taste, and a response to the world's beauties and terrors, its actualities and its dreams."¹⁰ When he sees a poet, he sees someone who has kept that youthful fire especially bright and lively.¹¹

C. Beauty, the Common Desire of Man

Singing is what the lover does, said Saint Augustine,¹² the lover who beholds a thing of beauty. In all systems that reduce man to a proletarian, beauty must be reduced to decoration which only the rich can afford. Beauty is not serious; its appreciation is not

rigorous. Poetry won't earn you a job, and therefore it is dispensable. Pieper thus lays bare the spiritual disease of such utilitarians:

The inmost significance of the exaggerated value which is set upon hard work appears to be this: man seems to mistrust everything that is effortless; he can only enjoy, with a good conscience, what he has acquired with toil and trouble; he refuses to have anything as a gift.¹³

To put it another way, beauty is the splendor of an inner goodness or truth, and must be so received, or not received at all. But man as mere producer and consumer knows no such gift. He thinks of quantity only, and of "consumer demand," reducing his masters to "those at the top of a hierarchy of consumption."¹⁴

But the idea that poetry, or any of the arts, was a prerogative of the wealthy alone is historical nonsense. Visit an antique store or curiosity shop, and you will see that ordinary people used to surround themselves with objects of beauty. Even things they put to practical use, like chairs, bed-warmers, butter churns, and stirrups, were touched by the playful spirit of poetic creation. Poor miners, farmers, herdsman, and quarrymen did not build flat gray boxes to live in; the flat gray box was visited upon the urban poor by their "betters" among modern architects. Poor fishermen, lumbermen, and trappers did not build hulking containers for children; they built schools that are sweet to behold, that looked something like chapels, or meeting halls, or homes. The hulking containers were visited upon us all by our "betters" among modern educational bureaucrats, supposedly to save money; and one lone parent stands as much chance of weighing upon what transpires within those containers as a dry leaf against a brick wall.

The aim of a liberal public education in literature used to be to bring beauty even to the

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poor. That was not so difficult after all, since many of the poets too had been poor; Herman Melville, our great epic poet in prose, wrote in the person of Ishmael that the whaling vessels were his Yale College and Harvard. And the poor man, like his rich cousin, played a musical instrument, by training or by ear or both, or knew plenty of people who did so; he knew by heart a hundred songs secular and sacred; and he no more relished ugliness or brutality for its own sake than he daubed his own kitchen with filth.

We might turn the question around and ask why we should be so hardhearted as to deny the poor their best chance, these days perhaps their only chance, of encountering the beauty of poetry? Man is that peculiar creature who needs most what as an animal he does not need at all. He needs what he cannot put to use. He needs beauty.

But beauty is not the result of mass production. Nor is an appreciation of beauty the result of methods or actions upon the pedagogical assembly line. You cannot turn a poem over to a committee of students doing “group work” and expect anything so private, even so shy, as that appreciation. It cannot be forced or commanded. It must be waited upon. Its quiet utterance must be heard.

Such hearing – not labored at or screwed out of a human brain by educational technology – is well illustrated by a charming anecdote that Untermeyer tells, of a senior whose turn came round to recite to the class some work he had committed to memory. The lad – a football player – took the stage, and, with real feeling and much poise, recited the first eight stanzas of Gray’s “Elegy.”¹⁶ When the boy took his seat, the teacher called for criticism. She asked one boy in particular, a boy who happened to be third baseman on the school team and who had inclined to be rather a ‘smart Alec.’

This time he was strangely silent. When the teacher pressed him, he became embarrassed, and then he stammered: ‘I can’t criticize him. I think it was fine. That’s my truly favorite poem, and I can’t say anything about it. I like it too well.’¹⁷

The boy’s reverent silence before the thing of beauty, Gray’s poem, is at once childlike and mature and wholly opposed to the noise of our vast educational machine.

D. An Education in Love

And that brings us to our third assertion. The boy who loved Gray’s “Elegy,” though he was usually garrulous, could not speak when the teacher asked him to comment upon the recitation. He did not merely reply that he had nothing to say. He replied that he could not possibly have anything to say because he loved the poem too much to sully it with commentary.

Untermeyer did not write his textbook simply to help students to understand poetry. He wrote it so that they would learn to love poetry because it was beautiful and true and worthy of their love. That is not sentimentality. It is a fully human response, and, in our world of mass phenomena, with ugliness, banality, uniformity, and slovenliness everywhere, it is a response that teachers have a duty to foster, and never to embitter or squelch.

It has grown by now to be a long and tiresome habit, our assuming that all good educators must arm their students against appeals to beauty. That is why we batter them with the ugly. There may be a less “noble” reason, too. Scorn is easier than devotion, and flippancy, the cadaver of mirth, is easier still. But that is to betray our charge as teachers. Says C. S. Lewis:

For every one pupil who needs to be guarded from a weak excess of sensibility there are three who

need to be awakened from the slumber of cold vulgarity. The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts. The right defense against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments. By starving the sensibility of our pupils we only make them easier prey to the propagandist when he comes. For famished nature will be avenged and a hard heart is no infallible protection against a soft head.¹⁸

Lewis' words are truer than ever. If the study of literature is only labor, for acquiring certain linguistic skills, then far from irrigating deserts, the teacher will be choking up with sand what few and trickling streams of humanity remain.

And again we ask, "What is a child?" Why should a child read the poem? What in the poem is true, and presented in beauty, worthy of our reverence and love?

For love is the key. Love will show us what is not a good reason for reading the poem. Suppose a child has a grandfather who lives a good bicycle's ride away. Grandfather has, scattered about his old house, flags from the Civil War, old coins, part of a harpoon, and a thousand books tumbled together by a principle of organization he alone knows, *The Sea-Hawk* next to *The City of God*. If you go there, he might be dozing in the sun, or playing cribbage with the neighbor next door. He might be scribbling a line or two of poetry. He might be turning a spindle on a lathe. With the grandfather, you never know. He might be doing nothing at all, which he reserves for the best of times, when he is most alert, and most content.

Why should the child visit his grandfather? The question makes no sense. Even to ask the question is to suggest that one has drifted some distance into madness or robotics.

Now suppose that the child's father, with an eye to the main chance, wishing to stuff his

son's resume for enrolling him in the "best" high school, should say, "Son, here is a pad and pen. Go to grandfather's house and take inventory of the shelves, one at a time. You will organize them according to the following method, adapted from Dewey." Or, "Son, here is a recording device. Go visit your grandfather and engage him in meaningful conversation about a topic of current public import, so that you can write a report upon it, comparing what he has to say with the statements of various sources you will locate in print or digitally, organizing the whole into an exhibition of wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement. And be back before supper, or you'll catch it."

The point is not simply that it would be rude to the good grandfather and might hurt his feelings. It is that you cannot really visit the old man that way. You will have made him into an object for analysis and dissection. The encounter will be functional, not human. You may pick up plenty of information from it; you may jot down the dates of all his coins. You will gain no knowledge; for genuine human knowledge is to mere information as information is to chaos, or nothingness. You will surely gain no wisdom, which soars far beyond even knowledge. It would be better for you if you did not visit the grandfather at all if you are going to reduce yourself to a toiler in the traces and the grandfather to the object to be worked. It would be better for you to play the truant and turn aside to see if the wild grapes down the dead-end street are purple yet. It would be better for children never to read a poem at all, than to read it in on the treadmill, as just a thing to be worked over, for acquiring some "skill," for a resume, for money, for stuff to buy, for death. It would be better to do nothing than to betray what ought to be loved.

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It is true that one has to learn how to read a poem, and the old textbooks are full of helpful pointers for doing that. Untermeyer spends more than four hundred pages coaching his youthful readers in the art. He does not overburden them with technical terms. He wishes instead that the reader will be still and observe the art with the same heightened feeling and imagination with which the poet observes the world. Here he describes Tennyson’s famous Eagle:

We see not only an eagle grasping the sheer rock of a high cliff, a lone black speck between the immense sweep of sky and ocean, but we see the world through his eyes: the sun is close and of a terrible brilliance, the entire universe is of an intense blue, and the tumultuous waves below him are slow-moving ripples. Therefore, the wave-lined ocean is a wrinkled sea, and when he shoots from his heights to strike at his prey, he falls like a ‘thunderbolt’.¹⁹

One does not read poems to learn about poetic techniques. That again is backwards. One learns about poetic techniques, if one learns about them at all, *the better to read poems*; and one reads poems for their own sake – that is, because they are beautiful and wise. Tennyson’s lyric shows us something about the eagle that is true, and it excites us, it captivates the imagination because his art presents that truth to us with the splendor of a grave and noble music.

A youth reads Dante’s line describing Beatrice’s first appearance to Virgil in the *Inferno*: *lucivan gli occhi suoi piu che la stella*, “Her eyes were shining brighter than the star.” What is he to make of that? If he is taught that it is only a traditional metaphor and a bit of poetic exaggeration, he might as well never read a poem again. It is only by the exercise of his imagination, an exercise that is less like labor than like play, that is blessedly impractical, that receives both the beauty of a woman and the beauty of Dante’s poetry as

a gift, that he can enter into the spirit of the line and say, “Yes, that is true, I have seen it.” Should someone then inquire as to whether seeing a heavenly beauty in the eyes of a virtuous young woman will assist the youth in his competition in a global economy, or in his private deliberation on tax rates, we must reply that Dante himself implicitly answers that question, by sending those who ask it down to their proper place several grades of the infernal funnel below. In other words, if you do not love, you should not read Dante.

E. The Love that Moves the Sun and the Other Stars

But perhaps, with our glance toward Dante, we have arrived at the real danger that poetry poses to the secular worshiper of work for work’s sake, and the vast totalizing secular system that such work props up. It is this: poetry and devotion spring from the same fount. Poetry at its most sublime – the epics of Homer and Virgil, *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, Wordsworth’s “Prelude” – is a record of man’s encounter with what is more than man.

That is because there is a deep harmony that unites love with celebration – and that unites celebration, in all its boisterous energy, with the effortless enjoyment of what is beautiful and true for its own sake. To reduce all things to utility is to banish the feast. No one can ask what use can be made of a feast without destroying the spirit of festivity. And there can be no feast unless the soul is ushered into the precincts of the divine. It is as Pieper puts it, thinking of all the cultures that have ever graced the earth:

There is no such thing as a festival “without gods” – whether it be a carnival or a marriage. That is not a demand, or a requirement; it does not mean that that is how things ought to be. Rather, it is meant as a simple statement of fact: however dim the recollection of the association may have become

in men's minds, a feast "without gods," and unrelated to worship, is quite simply unknown.²⁰

That does not mean that we must bind the festivity of poetry in our public schools to the seasons of any particular religious faith. It does mean, however, that poetry, and all of the arts properly approached, is like what Pieper describes as a Temple, whose space "is not used, is withdrawn from all merely utilitarian ends."²¹ It is why the one book that Bradbury's hero commits to memory is Ecclesiastes, full of the sad poetry of The Preacher, along with chapters from the exalted visions of the apostle John, in Revelation. To use poetry as a field for gaining linguistic skills, or to neglect it altogether, is to dismantle the Temple and leave not one stone upon another. It is to banish the feast and to stifle in the souls of students the natural human spirit that wishes to celebrate the beauty and goodness of a truth beheld and received in gratitude. Again we turn to Keats:

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness, but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and
quiet breathing.²²

"We murder to dissect," says Wordsworth. One can no more teach poetry by poetry-dissolving means than one can devise a strategy for joy, or force inspiration, or demand love, for "the spirit blows where it will" (John 3:8), and one can only rejoice in gratitude when it comes, and follow where it leads.

We can make a safe bet on where twenty pages of reading about the Spanish Flu will lead you. Perhaps you may become interested in disease, perhaps not. But there will be no open door of a temple, beckoning you to leave the world of total work. We can make no safe bet on where reading *Paradise Lost*

will lead you if you read it in the spirit of the feast, receiving it as a gift you cannot earn, its beauty ever gratuitous and overflowing beyond the cramped world of utility. If you enter that Temple, you may be changed forever. You may learn to take the shoes from off your feet and to shuck the bridle from your back. You may see things your masters do not want you to see because then they would be your masters no more. You may incline your ear and heart to a music they have tried to drown out. You may even catch a fleeting intimation, like a still small voice on a mountaintop, of the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.

II. How Poetry Has Been Taught in the Schools

Traditionally, the teaching of poetry has followed a three-pronged approach: (1) working out the meaning of a piece of poetry; (2) developing poetry-reading skills by looking at tone, structure, diction, themes, rhythm and rhyme, figurative language, and style; and (3) having students write about poetry and write their own poems.

Poetry has been taught as enhancement, as reinforcement, and in isolation. Poetry has been taught by historical periods, by themes, and by subgenres. There are as many ways to organize poetry in the literature curriculum as there are types of poetry. In traditional literature anthologies, poetry has enjoyed its own section, whether as American poetry, English poetry, world poetry, or a combination. Textbook authors have reinforced what teachers have always known—that poetry is a distinct study in the morass of literary choices, just as short stories, speeches, and novels are.

Young children love poetry. Songs like "Old MacDonald" and "I'm a Little Teapot" help

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students hear and find rhythm. Even the alphabet is made into a song that rhymes to help children learn it more easily. In this way, poetry is a kinesthetic experience, engaging not just the mind but the body as well. Many children’s stories are written in verse. Dr. Seuss is ubiquitous in classrooms for young students, as he should be. His poetry plays with sound, helping students hear the lilt and cadence of our language, while also telling imaginative stories. Shel Silverstein’s poetry similarly delights the ear and the mind with whimsy.

Anthologies for older students have always included the big names in American and English literature: Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Anne Bradstreet, Theodore Roethke, Anne Sexton, William Carlos Williams, Shakespeare, Lewis Carroll, and Thomas Hardy. The list is extensive, but the fact that these same authors continue to appear is no accident. Their works speak to English and American literary culture and history. The implicit if not explicit charge to educators is to initiate our students into the culture in which they will someday work and raise families. The literature of our culture reflects where we come from as much as does our history.

A. Working out the Meaning of a Poem

The first prong of traditional literary instruction might include questions about what the author wrote. We use the Emily Dickinson poem “Some Keep the Sabbath Going to Church” as an example (see Appendix A). Among the questions asked by the textbook editors/authors of a 1987 McDougal, Littell anthology of American literature are: “According to the poem, how does Dickinson like to celebrate the Sabbath? What is her favorite church?” These are fairly literal reading comprehension questions,

designed to check students’ understanding of what they have read.

A skilled teacher may then springboard from these questions to ask students to connect the poem’s meaning to their own experiences in order to give the poem some personal context. The larger purpose is to foster their own thinking about the poem’s meaning—to help them to value introspection—and to share the poet’s feelings. Robert Frost’s “No tears for the writer, no tears for the reader,” echoes a sentiment from the Roman lyric poet Horace.²³

Teachers of poetry help students to build bridges among the scattered bits of knowledge with which they come into their classrooms, to hold up mirrors in front of them, and to help them understand that although literature, especially poetry, is an escape, it is also how we connect to each other as human beings. But Archibald MacLeish wrote in the last line of his own poem “Ars Poetica.” “A poem should not mean/But be.” And a good teacher knows when to leave the poem alone and not “torture a confession out of it” (the last line in Billy Collins’ poem in Appendix A).²⁴

B. How a Poem Is Put Together

Dylan Thomas’ poem “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night” is an example of how the form of a poem enhances its meaning:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on that sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.²⁵

The metaphors of light for life and night for death help readers or listeners to understand that the speaker of the poem is begging someone to fight the approach of death. One can sense the almost desperate tone in the speaker's voice from the repetition of the first and third lines of the first stanza throughout the poem—a feature of the structure of a *villanelle*.²⁶

Metaphor and allusion are universal in poetry and help readers or listeners to see the world in a different way. The allusion to the myth of Daedalus and Icarus in Thomas' poem does so:

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,

It implies that a son should have listened to what his father taught while he had the chance, just as Icarus should have listened to his father when he was told not to fly too high. Understanding the allusion personalizes as well as deepens the meaning of the poem.

As we see in Thomas' poem, rhyme scheme and rhythm also contribute to a poem's pleasing and sometimes not so pleasing sound. Surely there is value in that which is merely pleasing.²⁷

Music may help to teach poetry too. Whether a teacher uses classical or contemporary music doesn't matter. When a poem has been set to music, the music often clarifies its meaning. William Sharp's operatic recording of Lewis Carroll's poem "Jabberwocky" makes evident that the poem, although written with many

nonsense words, is a quest poem that tells the story of a boy leaving home and searching for, battling, and overcoming a monster (see Appendix A). The boy returns home with the head of the beast, there is much celebration, and life goes on as before.

Sharp's music rises as the suspense grows, he stretches out the notes during the words "long time," and during the heat of the battle the piano music sounds almost scattered and frenzied. In the last stanza, the music resumes the slow, even tone it started with, and we know that life has returned to "normal." Students are able to "hear" the story even though half of the words are nonsense, just as they hear the desperation in the speaker's voice when Thomas repeats lines in his poem.

Traditional methods of teaching students to read poetry have usually included memorization. Memorization and recitation do not take place only in their heads. There is a kinesthetic dimension to the practice of memorizing and reciting. Every teacher has seen students who seem to have memorized a poem well but who freeze when they have to stand up in front of a class of fellow students. Students do not understand why they can say their poems "perfectly in [their] head[s]," but not in front of the class. As in any public speaking act, speakers must practice what they will say in the manner in which they will say it. It isn't enough for a student to memorize a poem in his head. He must practice reciting it aloud because the mind remembers what the body does. Kindergarten teachers know that hand motions with "Itsy Bitsy Spider" help elementary age children remember. Developing students' skills in reading is thus related to their own physical development.

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C. Writing about Poetry and Writing Poetry

When a teacher teaches poetry, students must read an enormous amount of poetry. Not just one poem about love, but five, ten poems about love. In this way students learn subtleties not only about love but also about form and structure. Likewise, students must write a great deal about the poems they read. They might write about the irony in Dickinson’s line about God being “a noted clergyman.” Or characterize Dickinson’s attitude toward Nature, so prevalent in her poetry. Or parody Carroll’s “Jabberwocky,” following his rhythm, rhyme scheme, and theme.

By writing about poetry and then writing their own poems, students internalize an iterative composing process. Choice of words, length of lines, concision, metaphor—it’s all part of learning to write, as in “Liking this, rejecting that, cautious and precise/Weaving words together, you’ll speak most happily/When skilled juxtaposition renews a common word.”²⁸ Writing poetry becomes yet another way to learn language skills.

The group learning so popular in today’s climate of education reform does not work for poetry instruction. Writing is a solitary activity. It requires reflection and the time to wade through the messiness of one’s mind and to figure out what one thinks, and why one thinks it. E.M. Forster is credited with having said “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?”²⁹ If writing is the inking of our thinking, students must have the space to do so. And it is at these times that deeper learning takes place.

Reading and writing about poetry as well as writing poetry encourages students to find that inner world of their own and a place where they can be contemplative. A poem is

not to be digested like a quick meal. It is to be savored, enjoyed, appreciated. A school’s poetry curriculum is not designed to teach skills that help students get jobs. Rather, it is to “make minds, not careers.”³⁰ And when a mind is strengthened, so is the ability to secure employment.

III. What Was the Poetry Curriculum in America’s Public Schools?

Once upon a time, poetry was a substantial part of the English curriculum. Several large-scale studies in the past century suggest its contours, always shaped by what English educators saw as its purpose in the schools.

A. Post World War II Studies

Possibly the most exhaustive examination of what was available in high school literature anthologies, the textbooks used for over a century in most secondary English classrooms, was reported in a 1963 book titled *High School English Textbooks*. James Lynch and Bertrand Evans, both professors of English at the University of California, Berkeley, scrutinized the contents of the 72 most frequently used anthologies for grades 9 to 12 in the 1950s, detailing by genre what they found.

Lynch and Evans viewed literature anthologies as “repositories of the very best ever thought and written in the spirit of the humanistic tradition and the Anglo-American heritage.”³¹ Because they considered poetry as the “literary heart” of an anthology, they calculated by grade level the number of different poems available across anthologies and listed the poets represented by these numbers.

Among their conclusions, Lynch and Evans suggest: (1) It is at least questionable “whether

a high school student inadequately read in the poetry of his own culture is prepared to undertake the study of another.” (2) “With lyric poetry particularly, the problem of finding poems with suitable translations is a serious one...” And (3) It is doubtful that “single short poems” by authors from various South American countries “cover” Latin American poetry or that “short poems” by authors across the world adequately “cover” world poetry.

In light of the many poems from outside that tradition in school anthologies, they questioned whether “world literature” should be included, given the “neglect by several anthologies of numerous major authors in the Anglo-American tradition.” We shall note the continuing relevance of their concern.

While Lynch and Evans saw “literary importance” as the criterion for selection, for a subject they believed students should see as a “serious and important body of matter for study,”³² George Norvell had a different view of the purpose for a school’s English curriculum. He published in 1973 a major study of secondary students’ interests in the texts they read in English class or independently.³³ His own interest in the topic had been sparked by his position as a state supervisor of English education in New York State for almost 30 years. By telling us what secondary students enjoyed reading in class or on their own, his report at the same time tells us what literary and non-literary texts they were assigned. Norvell’s purpose was to be able to recommend to English teachers titles that students would enjoy reading, with the hope that if teachers assigned them students would develop a life-long love of reading, which he believed to be a major, if not the major, purpose, of the school’s English curriculum.

Norvell’s information came from thousands of students across New York State. Not surprisingly, we learn from his study that students did not enjoy many of the selections they were assigned in English. The factor that most correlated with enjoyment was gender, not literary artistry or reading ability (with their teachers’ assistance, students in his study were classified as superior, average, or weak readers). In fact, he found that “the reading materials commonly used in literature classes are better liked by girls than boys in a ratio of more than two to one.” With respect to enjoyment by genre, “girls place essays and poems definitely higher than do boys...”³⁴ Even among types of poems, there were differences between the sexes. Although girls liked both lyric and narrative poetry equally well, boys liked lyric poetry significantly less than narrative poetry. Norvell concluded that “content is the touchstone of popularity,” and that the vast majority of poems selected for study by their English teachers “deal with themes and ideas which young people would reject if offered to them in prose.”³⁵

In a sense, Norvell was partly paraphrasing the findings of one of the earliest studies of children’s poetry preferences, a 1924 study by Helen Mackintosh.³⁶ She had found that students like poems that are funny, tell a good story, have adventure and excitement, have romantic and dramatic qualities, deal with understandable and interesting material, and have rhythm and rhyme. We see these qualities in some of the poems in Norvell’s study that high school boys said they liked best.

Although poetry and plays were boys’ least favorite genres, nevertheless, boys did have some favorites among the poems studied in their English classes. Those with the highest ratings by boys in grades 10, 11, and 12 were: “Ballad of Billy the Kid” (Knibbs); “Casey

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at the Bat” (Thayer); “Dorlan’s Home Walk” (Guiterman); “Cremation of Sam McGee” (Service); “Da Greata Stronga Man” (Daly); “Deacon’s Masterpiece” (Holmes); “George Washington” (Kirk); and “Old Ironsides” (Holmes). Poems with the highest ratings by girls in grades 10, 11, and 12 (in that same table) included: “Between Two Loves” (Daly); “Da Younga ‘Merican” (Daly); “Dorlan’s Home Walk” (Guiterman); “House with Nobody in It” (Kilmer); “How the Great Guest Came” (Markham); “O Captain! My Captain!” (Whitman); “Twins” (Leigh); and “George Washington” (Kirk). In general, girls liked the poems rated highly by boys more than the converse.

B. Core Knowledge Sequence

It is doubtful that many English teachers changed the poems they assigned to accord with the enjoyment ratings Norvell obtained. But, interestingly, use of a different criterion for selection turned up some of the same poets. In the late 1980s, the Core Knowledge Foundation, established by literary scholar E.D. Hirsch, issued the Core Knowledge Sequence, a set of content guidelines for grades K-8. Not surprisingly, many of the highly rated poems or authors assigned in grades 10, 11, and 12 in George Norvell’s study are in the Core Knowledge Sequence. Required in grade 7 are poems by Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson, Alfred Lord Tennyson, William Blake, Robert Service, Wilfred Owen, Robert Frost, Countee Cullen, T.S. Eliot, Langston Hughes, and William Carlos Williams. Required in grade 8 are poems by e.e. cummings, Carl Sandburg, Dylan Thomas, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning, Emily Dickinson, William Wordsworth, Robert Frost, Edwin Arlington Robinson, William Shakespeare, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Gerald Manley Hopkins,

Allen Ginsberg, Langston Hughes, and Gwendolyn Brooks.

The author lists stimulate several observations. First, we are struck by the fact that what the Core Knowledge Sequence requires in grades 7 and 8 seems to be at a higher level of conceptual and/or reading difficulty than what students in the upper high school grades in the 1950s and 1960s mentioned as enjoyable reading. The difference in reading level may reflect lower academic standards in secondary English classes in American public schools after World War II and/or a deliberate increase in the relative difficulty of the literary works selected for the elementary and middle school grades in the Core Knowledge Sequence.

The latter hypothesis received some confirmation from the results of an examination of the selections in reading instructional textbooks for the elementary and middle school curriculum in the early years of the twentieth century. The difficulty level of the required literary texts in grades 7 and 8 in the Core Knowledge Sequence is close to the level of what was once in the school curriculum for all students in those grades.³⁸ This impressionistic finding raises the question: To what extent are secondary teachers responding to lower student reading skills today in selecting the genres and poems for all students in mixed-ability classes to read?

Second, the corpus of poems in the Core Knowledge Sequence has both a more British and a more African-American flavor than do Norvell’s lists. The authors of the Core Knowledge Sequence acknowledge that they sought to include what they considered multicultural texts, and E.D. Hirsch’s own literary scholarship centered on British poets.

Third, required titles in the Sequence say much less about a poem’s or poet’s popularity than about the purpose for schooling, as it sees it. Norvell was interested in recommending what students seemed to enjoy reading so long as the poems were of high quality, or, as he put it, where “the lines of student popularity and critical approval converge.”³⁹ He was thus indirectly hinting at the need to cater to the school population that secondary English teachers were teaching in mid-century America. On the other hand, the Core Knowledge Sequence was and remains centered on “cultural” literacy, on what students should be familiar with (literary work or author or both) to be considered educated—or as the Sequence itself states: to provide a “foundation for later learning” and “the common ground for communication in a diverse society.”

C. National Survey of High School English Teachers’ Poetry Assignments

Stotsky’s survey in 2010 of the major titles English teachers assign in grades 9, 10, and 11 in honors or standards classes (i.e., not in the highest or lowest English classes in a school) found little overall difference in the profile of poets and/or poems between their assignments and those in the Sequence. Interviewers spoke with over 400 English teachers to obtain descriptions of what they assigned in over 800 courses at these grade levels (two courses per teacher in a nationally representative sample of teachers at these grade levels).⁴⁰ Table 1 is taken from this survey. This table excludes the book-length plays or poems (such as *Julius Caesar* or *The Iliad*) also mentioned by teachers.

However, while the overall profile of poets mentioned in the 2010 survey is not very different from those required in the Core Knowledge Sequence (and it is possible that

the list of required poems in the Sequence influenced the contents of the very large American and British/world literature anthologies used by most high school English teachers), what is very different are the frequencies at which they are mentioned at each of these three grade levels.

Table 1: Major Poets Mentioned 15 or More Times by Grade Level

Major Poets Assigned	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Total
Robert Frost	87	80	96	263
Emily Dickinson	49	66	113	228
Edgar Allan Poe	74	42	53	169
Langston Hughes	59	45	57	161
Walt Whitman	19	23	105	147
William Shakespeare	67	55	18	140
Maya Angelou	31	13	19	63
e.e. cummings	16	28	17	61
Carl Sandburg	19	13	22	54
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow	4	8	31	43
Anne Bradstreet	2	6	27	35
T.S. Eliot	2	7	22	31
William Wordsworth	7	7	11	25
Edgar Lee Masters	4	7	14	25
William Cullen Bryant	0	3	19	22
Nicki Giovanni	7	9	5	21
Sylvia Plath	3	6	12	21
Ralph Waldo Emerson	0	2	19	21
William Carlos Williams	1	4	16	21
Gwendolyn Brooks	2	11	6	19
Paul Dunbar	7	2	10	19
Pablo Neruda	2	14	2	18
Theodore Roethke	3	12	2	17
Ezra Pound	2	5	10	17
Edwin Arlington Robinson	0	1	15	16
Homer	10	4	1	15
Robert Browning	2	5	8	15
John Keats	2	6	7	15
Pat Mora	4	11	0	15
Other Poets	183	325	307	815

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Beyond the first half dozen names, the numbers are miniscule, indicating that few students nationally are reading these poets. Not only are students on average by 2010 reading few poems, they are reading few poems or poets in common.

IV. Common Core’s English Language Arts Standards

In 2010, a large majority of the states adopted the Common Core English language arts (ELA) standards, chiefly intended, we were told, to serve as a guide to the school curriculum and as the basis for common tests now being developed. How do Common Core’s English language arts standards, released in June 2010, fit in with what seems to be a disappearing poetry curriculum in this country?

A. Content- and Culture-Free Skills

To begin with, readers need to understand that most of Common Core’s ELA standards are actually content- and culture-free skills. Here is a grade 9/10 literature standard as an example. “Determine a theme or central idea of a text, and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.” This is a content- and culture-free skill, not an academic standard for grade 9/10, because it can be applied as easily to “The Three Little Pigs” as to *Moby-Dick*. There is nothing in the “standard” to suggest level of reading difficulty or complexity.

Common Core did recognize that the same skill set could in theory be the curricular objective at every single grade level and that the content of a K-12 reading curriculum needs to increase in difficulty through the grades. So it provided an appendix that is supposed to help teachers understand what level of

reading difficulty should characterize the texts chosen to address its ELA standards at each grade level. But when we look at the poems listed for each span of grades in Appendix B, which lists exemplars of “complexity” and “quality” (not recommended or required texts) for each successive grade span, we find an incoherent group of poems representing a wide range of intellectual levels, literary movements, and literary traditions at every grade span. What an English teacher or school may infer as guidelines to complexity or quality from any one group of poems is totally unclear. For example, the following poems serve as exemplars of complexity and quality for grades 6 to 8:

Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth. “Paul Revere’s Ride”
Whitman, Walt. “O Captain! My Captain!”
Carroll, Lewis. “Jabberwocky.”
Navajo tradition. “Twelfth Song of Thunder.”
Dickinson, Emily. “The Railway Train.”
Yeats, William Butler. “The Song of Wandering Aengus.”
Frost, Robert. “The Road Not Taken.”
Sandburg, Carl. “Chicago.”
Hughes, Langston. “I, Too, Sing America.”
Neruda, Pablo. “The Book of Questions.”
Soto, Gary. “Oranges.”
Giovanni, Nikki. “A Poem for My Librarian, Mrs Long.”

Some of the poems on this list may at first seem impressive for grades 6 to 8. But let’s take a closer look at Pablo Neruda’s “Book of Questions,” for example. Below are a number of excerpts from this work, translated from Spanish into English. As a commentator on Google explains: “These are translated short short poems...and all their contents are philosophical conundrums about ordinary things in life.” While you, the reader, read them, you might ask yourself: For what purpose would a middle school English or reading teacher teach Neruda’s poems? How many meet the criteria for enjoyment mentioned by George Norvell or

Helen Mackintosh? How many are familiar to a large body of Americans, whether or not Spanish-speaking?

Tell me, is the rose naked
or is that her only dress?

Why do trees conceal
the splendor of their roots?

Who hears the regrets
of the thieving automobile?

Is there anything in the world sadder
than a train standing in the rain?

If I have died and don't know it of whom do I
ask the time?

Why do leaves commit suicide when they feel
yellow?

Is it true that in an anthill dreams are a duty?

Love, love, his and hers, if they've gone, where
did they go?

How many weeks are in a day and how many
years in a month?

Let's try another one—William Butler Yeats' "The Song of the Wandering Aengus" (see Appendix A). It is described in an overview of a college lecture in the following way: "Yeats' commitment to a poetry of symbol is explored in "The Song of the Wandering Aengus," a fable of poetic vocation."⁴¹ One more. Emily Dickinson's "The Railway Train" (see Appendix A).

What at first seemed impressive may now seem pretentious. Such exemplars raise two distinct sets of questions: Who was the real audience for Appendix B in Common Core's ELA document? Teachers or potential advocates for Common Core (e.g., the editorial board of the *New York Times*)? Why were Neruda's "Book of Questions" and Yeats' and Dickinson's poems listed as exemplars of complexity and quality for grades 6 to 8? Why were they listed at all in Common Core's Appendix B? Are they more appropriate for an Advanced Placement

course in literature or for a college course?

And why offer such a randomly selected group of poems to illustrate complexity or quality? Does such a scattered list of poems suggest disdain for coherence of any kind in a curriculum?

B. Poetry Skills Taught in Common Core

Now let's look at some of the middle school literature standards themselves to get a sense of what skills English teachers are to develop in their middle school students in order to read poetry. Here are the few that seem most applicable to poetry in grades 6 to 8.

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.

[At a later grade] Analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama

Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.

Earlier, in grade 4, students have been expected to:

Explain major differences between poems, drama, and prose, and refer to the structural elements of poems (e.g., verse, rhythm, meter)..."

Given the paucity of standards mentioning poetry at all, never mind the elements of poetry, it is not clear that poetry as a genre can be well addressed by English teachers in a Common Core-oriented classroom. Nor can they easily choose to do so in the reduced amount of time that English teachers are to spend on literary texts during an academic year.

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C. Reduction of reading instructional time for literary study

The reduction of literary-historical content in the standards is an inevitable consequence of Common Core’s emphasis on informational reading.⁴² The nine literature standards and ten informational standards at every grade level in Common Core’s reading standards promote a 50/50 split between literature and informational reading. At the same time, Common Core indicates that English classes must teach more informational reading or literary nonfiction than ever before. Common Core also states that the common tests in English language arts now being developed at the high school level must match the 30/70 percentages on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) grade 12 reading test (30 percent literary passages and 70 percent informational passages). Strangely, Common Core has yoked the English curriculum to a test with arbitrary percentages for types of reading that have no basis in research or in informed professional consent. They also make no sense arithmetically. How can 30 percent of the reading in the entire curriculum be literary when at least half of what they read in English class must be informational?

D. How Poetry Is To Be Taught under the Common Core: A Case Study

David Coleman, chief architect of Common Core’s English language arts standards, has been quoted as saying that “As you grow up in this world, you realize people really don’t give a ... about what you feel or what you think.” But as teachers and students both know, poetry is very much about thinking and feeling. While the Common Core document purports to be about the English language arts, there seems to be little place for the arts in Coleman’s philosophy. His *diktat* about the

appropriate ratio of literature to nonfiction reading across the curriculum,⁴³ buried in a footnote on page five of the ELA document, seems to have stimulated bizarre advice on the texts to use in the English curriculum.

Nor has Coleman or his co-writer Susan Pimentel made clear attempts to set the record straight about the misinterpretation of these percentages in Common Core’s ELA document. They claim that the English class is to continue its focus on literature all the while insisting on the teaching of more “informational” or nonfiction texts in the English class, and they have never offered a set of new percentages in place of the implicit 50/50 mandate. Utility and numbers seem to be Common Core’s major concern, so that the study of poetry for its own sake may almost disappear in language arts classrooms.

We describe in the following pages the literature curriculum developed for grade 8 English classes in the Fayetteville, Arkansas schools by an outside consultant hired at an exorbitant fee to align the district’s curriculum with Coleman’s recommended percentages.⁴⁴ The consultant repeatedly discouraged the inclusion of poetry on the grounds that it cannot be analyzed by Lexile measures. According to Lexile.com, a website that explains how to determine a text’s complexity, “Texts such as lists, recipes, poetry, and song lyrics are not analyzed because they lack conventional punctuation.” In addition to dismissing poetry, broadly speaking, in such a series of genres, we find the *coup de grace* for a Common Core-based reading program: “Non-prose books do not receive a Lexile measure.”

It is thus not surprising that the consultant’s approach to the inclusion of poetry in a Common Core-based literature curriculum went something like this: First create a unit

theme for each quarter of the school year, then choose two major nonfiction texts for two of the quarters and two major works of fiction for the other two quarters, all addressing the theme. Then find some short stories and pieces of nonfiction to go with the theme. And then find a poem that “fits” the theme.

She first established “Do the right thing” as the theme for the first quarter of the school year. After the testing consortium to which Arkansas belonged indicated that a work of fiction was to be the major work studied during the first quarter, the consultant asked teachers at a planning meeting to decide on the spot a text that would fit her theme. They chose *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles because enough copies were available in the school. They also added several short stories to complement, and be completed before, study of the novel: “The Mustache” by Robert Cormier, “All Summer in a Day” by Ray Bradbury, and “The Scarlet Ibis” by James Hurst. To meet nonfiction requirements, they included Philip Stanhope’s “Letter to His Son: Rules of Conduct in Polite Company” and Mark Twain’s “Advice to Youth.”

Clearly, students could make connections among them and find common ideas. Who couldn’t? The theme had already been decided upon by a consultant with no background at all in teaching English. While the literature class should be a place for students to discuss ethical principles, do students engage in “deeper” thinking when they are only asked “Did this character do the right thing?” (That was the question teachers were given by the consultant.) The pieces ceased to become occasions for reflection on the part of the learner. Rather, they were used to “beat” students on the head with an idea that was repeated over and over and over, as in the “drill and practice” methods that reformers continually denigrate.

The only poetry selection included in the first quarter readings was Emily Dickinson’s “I’m Nobody! Who Are You?”

I’m nobody! Who are you?
Are you nobody, too?
Then there’s a pair of us – don’t tell!
They’d banish – you know!

How dreary to be somebody!
How public like a frog
To tell one’s name the livelong day
To an admiring bog!

While the speaker in this poem has something in common with the character of Gene in *A Separate Peace*, it is not clear what connections the poem has with the other texts in the themed unit. After being given the theme at the onset of study, students had little interest in analyzing the meaning of this poem. The Dickinson poem was simply an afterthought, a condescension, and it is not something students are likely to remember.

Selections for the second quarter’s theme, “Do the right thing in the world,” included Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere,” but not for its delightful cadence and irregular rhyme, reminiscent of the sound of the horse’s hoof beats. No, the poem was to be assigned after grade 8 English students had read the first chapter in Malcolm Gladwell’s *The Tipping Point*.⁴⁵ But once students had read Gladwell’s references to Paul Revere, what was the point of reading a poem about him? Students could not have analyzed the poem for Longfellow’s historical inaccuracies. The poem was simply a place-filler, it seemed, and in effect a waste of the students’ and the teachers’ time. The “So what?” of the poem wasn’t “discovered” by the students; it was a given. It thus became a boring experience for students and teachers.

No poetry was included in the third quarter, whose theme was “How the world affects

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our decision to do the right thing.” For the fourth quarter, the major work to be read was *Truce*, a 116-page work of nonfiction about the Christmas truce of 1914 in which soldiers chose, against orders, to stop fighting in World War I (this text was also selected by the consultant).⁴⁶ Also included were: Walt Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing,” William Butler Yeats’ “Politics,” Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” and Polonius’ advice to his son, Laertes, from *Hamlet*.

Poetry could be assigned to go beyond the consultant’s vision for the unit. To develop student understanding of patriotism and the nature of war, Jamie Highfill gave students Stephen Crane’s “War is Kind” and Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce Et Decorum Est” to read. Students discussed the sarcastic nature of both poems and then compared what they believed the poets to be saying with how the soldiers in *Truce* stopped fighting—inferring that sometimes “the right thing” is more than patriotism and a love of one’s country but a love of all humanity.

To work more poetry into the curriculum, Highfill assigned more poems as homework, directing particular poems to particular groups of students. These groups read Wilfred Owens’ “The Send Off,” Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” Carl Sandburg’s “Grass” and “Iron,” Joy Gresham’s “Snow in Madrid,” and Alan Seeger’s “I Have a Rendezvous With Death.” After becoming familiar with many different war poems, students had more nuanced ideas about war (pageantry, lost innocence, violence, sacrifice, youth, idealism, chivalry, the idea of quest) than they would with only the three original poems assigned in the consultant-designed unit.

Disturbingly, few English teachers in this district raised objections about the ham-

pered way that the original curriculum was designed. Nor were they vocal about the lack of poetry as a study in and of itself. Seven poems over the course of a school year let teachers know how important poetry is in a Common Core-based curriculum. In fact, one administrator indicated that because she didn’t understand poetry, it was not important for use in the classroom. Her advice to the English teachers was to follow the “curriculum” as prescribed.

Nor were the consultant’s credentials ever questioned. That she had never taught in an English classroom was never raised, and her focus on Lexile levels, without consideration of the difficulty or ease of the subject matter, was accepted at face value. English teachers’ own classroom curricula honed over years of trial and error in teaching were discarded without a thought.

Poetry has become a “nobody” in Common Core. Why teach students how to read and write poetry if it doesn’t follow conventional punctuation? If it can’t be measured? If it’s too subjective, like art? Common Core seems to be more about convention, about standardization, and about taking the “art” out of English language arts.

V. Why the Hostility to Poetry in Common Core?

The Common Core English language arts standards were intended to apply to all students indiscriminately to ensure that they would become efficient workers in a “global economy.” In other words, the aim is precisely the reverse of that to which the old proponents of a humane education were committed. Those proponents knew well that common workers would have little opportunity from day to day to encounter the great works of human art and thought. They therefore sought to give them what they could, when

they could – in school. The aim was to raise and ennoble them, to give them some of what their more fortunate neighbors would enjoy. But the aim here is to depress and level, not to ennoble. It is to make proletarians of us all.

But no one will buy a product with the label “proletarian” upon it. That is why we must mask the reality with slogans. According to the Common Corers, students trained to become workers will “actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews.” That is the language of the marketer and the campaigner.

The designers of the Common Core, ideologues themselves, do not recognize this. In all their hundreds of clotted and ill-written pages of self-promotion, *diktats*, and appeals to statistics, they mention beauty only once, in the context of a “skill.” But the greatest “skill” in reading is not a skill at all. It is something quite different. It is a virtue, a habit of peaceful reception. One cannot produce joy on an assembly line. One cannot manufacture gratitude. One cannot devise a formula for humble hearing.

So it is no surprise that the Common Corers gradually leach poetry out of the high school system. We see how the process takes place in the “task example” for one of the poems they left behind, Keats’ poignant “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” The poet is beholding an ancient urn, decorated with bands of sculpture, of gods and men and maidens dancing, of a lover trying to woo his beloved and ever “winning near the goal,” of a town beyond the sculpture itself, dwelling in the imagination’s distance, a town pouring forth her people on this feast day, while a priest leads the ribboned heifer to sacrifice. It is all youth, and strangely deathless; the feasters

know no satiety; the lover will never feel “a burning forehead, and a parching tongue.” And Keats, who though young was in poor health and was ever aware of the passage of time and the battering waves of change, ends his poem with these solemn words:

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,”—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Here, for once, is a chance to talk about something as high as the heavens and as deep as the sea! The teacher could ask why we feel a strange sweet sadness when we behold a beautiful thing made by the hands of someone long since passed away. Or whether beauty does give us a vision of truth, even in the midst of sorrow and age and decay and death. Or whether the still silence of a work of art can speak more deeply to us than a month of words and flashing lights and noise. Or why Keats seems to say that the wiser we grow, the more we understand that beauty alone will show us the truth we need. Or perhaps we should not at first ask the poem any question at all, but listen to it, and listen again, and be silent.

We should treat Keats’ ode with the same reverence with which Keats treats the urn. We should seek from the poetry the wisdom he seeks from the sculpture. Or we should not seek so much as accept. We should learn how to behold.

Here is the sum of what the Corers have to advise, in their banal and lifeless prose:

Students cite strong and thorough textual evidence from John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” to support their analysis of what the poem says explicitly about the urn as well as what can be inferred about the urn from evidence in the

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poem. Based on their close reading, students draw inferences from the text regarding what meanings the figures decorating the urn convey as well as noting where the poem leaves matters about the urn and its decoration uncertain.

But neither the urn nor the poem is a teacher. The poem is a crime scene, and the students are forensic investigators. Or the poem is a dreary piece of “text,” and the students are to engage in a dreary, impersonal, mechanical piece of drudgery. If we want young people to hate poetry, here is the way to make sure of it.

To see what we mean by this dryness, this numbness, we shall now submit the great aim of the Common Core Standards in English Language Arts, as declared by its clumsy begetters:

As a natural outgrowth of meeting the charge to define college and career readiness, the Standards also lay out a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the skills and understandings students are expected to demonstrate have wide applicability outside the classroom or workplace. Students who meet the Standards readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature. They habitually perform the critical reading necessary to pick carefully through the staggering amount of information available today in print and digitally. They actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews. They reflexively demonstrate the cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic. In short, students who meet the Standards develop the skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening that are the foundation for any creative and purposeful expression in language.

No one who could write that excerpted paragraph above, with not the least touch

of self-awareness, modesty, or wit, without any sense for what words mean (do we demonstrate cogent reasoning reflexively, as when somebody raps us on the knee with a hammer?), without any love of language, without any clear thought but only the aim to smother us under a barrage of verbiage, heaping one vague piety after another, one Great Insight after another, one dead cliché after another – no such person can possibly have really known the wonder of poetry, or can remember the wonder of childhood.

In all that heap of self-promotion and veiled threats, there is not one well-turned phrase, not one moment of tender regard for a child, or a parent, or a mill-stream, or a fading autumn day, or a poem. There is no life in it, but a gray death-in-life. It is like a corpse pricked by regular electrical charges to the simulacrum of a life; work here, vote there, shop here, die there.

The Common Corers do not talk often of truth. Recall that their ideal student will “reflexively demonstrate the cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic.” No one wishes to dismiss cogent reasoning and use of evidence, or private deliberation, or responsible citizenship. Evidence that can be used has its place. Far be it from us to decry criminal investigators. But what does “cogent reasoning” mean? If it means only that one examines things that one can measure, for participating in political or social machinery, then we deny most strenuously that one reads literature for those purposes.

We must not limit reason to what can be calculated or reduced to statistics or forensics. Perhaps that is why the Common Core has so little to say about poetry, and why, in all of the literary samples they include on

their site, not one of them has anything to do with man's longing for the divine.

That omission cannot be the result of chance. The odds are overwhelmingly against it. It means that you have to avoid most of Chaucer, much of Shakespeare, and all of Spenser. You cannot include a single sacred lyric by Donne, Herbert, or Hopkins. Milton must be banished from the Common Core garden, his sin being that he writes about sin, his profanity that he writes about holiness. With him goes the greatest and most influential poem in English, *Paradise Lost*. Along with Milton goes much of Dryden and Pope and Johnson, much of the best of Wordsworth and Keats, almost all of Coleridge. The fact is that English literature until recently was quite steeped in Scripture and was often preoccupied with the great existential questions of human life, which could not even be posed without reference to faith. Out goes Tennyson's "In Memoriam." Out goes Browning's rascally theologian in "Fra Lippo Lippi." Out goes Eliot's "Four Quartets." Out goes any real learning about Sidney's great sequence of sonnets, *Astrophil and Stella*. Open an old bound volume of *The Century*, a supposedly secular magazine, and you will see that more than half of the poems, many written by ordinary people whose names we have forgotten, have to do with God and man. All must go.

This is no coincidence. The Common Core proponents do not like poetry. The whole thrust of their standards is away from poetry and toward "informational" texts. Not one of the high school essays which they include in their massive appendix has to do with poetry. It is not hard to see why. Information can be managed. But poetry cannot. Information for information's sake befits a soulless drudge in a soulless world. One may scour the hundreds of pages of the Common Core, including its

appendices filled with samples of writing by students that the proponents commend, and not find one sentence steeped in wonder. Poetry for poetry's sake befits a fully mature human being, who is infinitely more than a worker or a voter. Common Core's English language arts standards reveal the grim irony of the misnomer "Common Core," for there is no core at all in any set of standards built around a negative: no heart, no shared objects of love, reverence, and memory.

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Author Profiles: *Additions to what is in the Executive Summary*

Anthony Esolen has published a volume of his own poetry, *Peppers*, and seven other books, including two which bear upon the matter at hand: *Ironies of Faith: The Laughter at the Heart of Christian Literature* and *Ten Ways to Destroy the Imagination of Your Child*.

Jamie Highfill contributed a chapter, “Doing the Right Thing: Comedy and Political Satire in Grade 8,” to *The Death and Resurrection of a Coherent Literature Curriculum*, by Sandra Stotsky. From 2005 to 2012, she served as co-director of the Northwest Arkansas Writing Project, an affiliate of the National Writing Project, at the University of Arkansas. She moved to northern Virginia at the end of the 2013 school year.

Sandra Stotsky is the author of a nation-wide survey on the major reading selections high school English teachers in grades 9, 10, and 11 assign in honors and standards courses and how they approach literary study. This survey was published as FORUM 4 by the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers in 2010. Her latest book, *The Death and Resurrection of a Coherent Literature Curriculum*, was published by Rowman & Littlefield in 2012.

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Endnotes

1. Romano Guardini wrote, shortly after the misery of the Second World War, that only by asceticism could modern man recover his civilization and culture, for “only the freedom won through self-mastery can address itself with earnestness and gravity to those decisions which will affect all reality.” See *The End of the Modern World* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1968), p. 113.
2. Gabriel Marcel, in *Man Against Mass Society* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), written shortly after the Second World War, puts the issue to us as a challenge to revive the very possibility of a human civilization: “The more techniques advance, the more reflection is thrust into the background – and I believe that this cannot be a matter of mere chance... [T]he progress and above all the extreme diffusion of techniques tends to create a spiritual and intellectual atmosphere (or, more precisely, an anti-spiritual and anti-intellectual atmosphere) as unfavorable as possible to the exercise of reflection” (p. 9). For “techniques,” read “skills;” not reflection, but reflex actions, like the predictable responses of a machine.
3. Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: New American Library, 1963), pp. 40-41.
4. Pieper, p. 20.
5. Pieper, p. 34.
6. Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), p. 20.
7. Bradbury, p. 139.
8. Louis Untermeyer, *Doorways to Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), p. 21. Untermeyer wrote those words while America was still mired in economic depression.
9. John Greenleaf Whittier, “The Barefoot Boy.” By contrast with that happy freedom, Pieper describes the urge to deny the liberality of the liberal arts as a kind of proletarianism, whether “occasioned by lack of property, State compulsion, or spiritual impoverishment.”
10. Untermeyer, p. 495.
11. Untermeyer, p.13. Here is what he has to say: “Poetry has a special appeal for youth. This is so chiefly because life is new and the world’s wonders are fresh and vivid when we are young. Poetry and youth are made for each other. Although poets are caricatured in the comic papers, poetry is not written by queer creatures who know nothing about life and by retired scholars who remain in hiding behind their books and their beards. Youth is the time when ideas and emotions rise quickly to the surface; in spring every boy and every girl becomes a poet.”
12. Augustine, Sermon 336, par. 1.
13. Pieper, pp. 32-33. “In the beginning there is always a gift,” he goes on to say, recognizing that at the foundation of any person’s true engagement with reality must lie the virtue of gratitude. For there is grace both in giving and receiving.
14. Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (University of Chicago, 1948), p. 77. Lacking any transcendent aim, says Weaver, “having become incapable of knowing,” modern man “becomes incapable of working, in the sense that all work is a bringing of the ideal from potentiality to

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actuality,” p. 73. Work for work’s sake may be strenuous, but it is not truly human work. It may possess considerable rigor; so do corpses.

15. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ch. 24 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), p. 101.

16. Thomas Gray, “Elegy Written in a Country Graveyard,” 1751.

17. Untermeyer, p. 9.

18. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 24.

19. Untermeyer, p. 190.

20. Pieper, pp. 56-57.

21. Pieper, p. 58.

22. Keats, “Endymion: A Poetic Romance,” ll. 1-5, in *Selected Poems and Letters*, ed. Douglas Bush (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959), p. 39.

23. A.S. Kline, trans. Horace: *Ars Poetica*, (www.poetryintranslation.com), 2005, lines 99-104.

24. Billy Collins, “Introduction to Poetry,” *The Apple That Astonished Paris* (Fayetteville, AR: The University of Arkansas Press, 1988), p. 58.

25. X.J. Kennedy and Dana Goia, *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and Writing* (New York: Pearson, Longman, 2009), p. 606.

26. A *villanelle* consists of five stanzas of three lines each and a sixth stanza with four lines. The rhyme scheme of “aba” is repeated through the first five stanzas, and then changes to “abaa” in the sixth. The first line of the poem is repeated at the end of the second and fourth stanzas, and as the third line in the sixth stanza. The last line of the first stanza is repeated at the end of the third, fifth and sixth stanzas of the poem.

27. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren discuss that very question in their *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1942), p. 32. “The pleasure of literature, we need to maintain, is not one preference among a long list of possible pleasures, but is a ‘higher pleasure’ because pleasure is in a higher kind of activity, i.e. non-acquisitive contemplation. And the utility – the seriousness, the instructiveness – of literature is a pleasurable seriousness, i.e. not the seriousness of a duty which must be done or of a lesson to be learned but an aesthetic seriousness, a seriousness of perception.... Now however, when history, like literature, appears a loose, ill-defined discipline, and when science rather is the impressive rival, it is contended rather that literature gives a knowledge of those particularities with which science and philosophy are not concerned.”

28. Kline, 48-48.

29. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1927).

30. Chris Hedges, *Empire of Illusion* (New York: Nation Books, 2009), p. 107.

31. James J. Lynch and Bertrand Evans, *High School English Textbooks: A Critical Examination* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), p. 5.

32. Lynch and Evans, p. 129.

33. George Norvell. *The Reading Interests of Young People* (East Lansing: Michigan State

University Press, 1973).

34. Norvell, pp. 7-8.

35. Norvell, p. 53.

36. Helen Mackintosh. A study of children's choices in poetry. *The Elementary English Review*. 1924: 1, 85-89.

37. Norvell. Reading Interests. From Table 22-1, pp. 125-127.

38. See Chapter 1 in Sandra Stotsky, *Losing Our Language* (The Free Press, 1999).

39. Norvell, p. 2.

40. *FORUM 4: Literary Study in Grades 9, 10, and 11: A National Survey*. (Boston: Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers, 2010). http://www.alscw.org/publications/forum/forum_4.pdf

41. English 310, Modern Poetry, Yale University. <http://oyc.yale.edu/english/engl-310/lecture-4>.

42. Mark Bauerlein and Sandra Stotsky. How Common Core's ELA Standards Place College Readiness at Risk. White Paper No. 89. Boston: Pioneer Institute, September 2012. <http://pioneerinstitute.org/download/how-common-cores-ela-standards-place-college-readiness-at-risk/>

43. "Teachers of senior English classes, for example, are not required to devote 70 percent of reading to information texts. Rather, 70 percent of student reading across the grade should be informational."

44. Rose Ann Pearce, "Advisers Train Educators: Goal is to Improve Student Learning," *Northwest Arkansas Times*, November 11, 2013. http://docs.newsbank.com/s/InfoWeb/aggdocs/NewsBank/14A02A8CB065B988/A48E7DF7EA354DD28BD81A193C79B506?p_multi=NATF&lang=en-US

45. Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2002), p. 60.

46. Jim Murphy, *Truce: The Day the Soldiers Stopped Fighting* (NY: Scholastic Press, 2009), 116 pages. The book received many awards and was recommended for reading by YALSA, Best Books for Young Adults; Booklist Editors Choice; and Junior Library Guild. Its reading level according to ATOS for Books, a readability formula, was 8.2 (grade 8, second month).

Appendix A: Poems Referred to in the Report

"Introduction to Poetry"

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide
or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

Billy Collins

"Some Keep the Sabbath Going to Church"

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church –
I keep it, staying at Home –
With a Bobolink for a Chorister –
And an Orchard, for a Dome –

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice –
I, just wear my Wings –
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton – sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman –
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last –
I'm going, all along.

Emily Dickinson

"Jabberwocky"

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!"

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought --
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffing through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

"And, has thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"
He chortled in his joy.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

Lewis Carroll

“The Song of the Wandering Aengus”

I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;
And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.

When I had laid it on the floor
I went to blow the fire a-flame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And someone called me by my name:
It had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done,
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.

William Butler Yeats

“The Railway Train”

I like to see it lap the miles,
And lick the valleys up,
And stop to feed itself at tanks;
And then, prodigious, step

Around a pile of mountains,
And, supercilious, peer
In shanties by the sides of roads;
And then a quarry pare

To fit its sides, and crawl between,
Complaining all the while
In horrid, hooting stanza;
Then chase itself down the hill

And neigh like Boanerges;
Then, punctual as a star,
Stop - docile and omnipotent -
At its own stable door.

Emily Dickinson

■ **"The Dying of the Light"**

"The Barefoot Boy"

Blessings on thee, little man,
Barefoot boy, with cheek of tan!
With thy turned-up pantaloons,
And thy merry whistled tunes;
With thy red lip, redder still
Kissed by strawberries on the hill;
With the sunshine on thy face,
Through thy torn brim's jaunty grace;
From my heart I give thee joy,—
I was once a barefoot boy!
Prince thou art,—the grown-up man
Only is republican.
Let the million-dollared ride!
Barefoot, trudging at his side,
Thou hast more than he can buy
In the reach of ear and eye,—
Outward sunshine, inward joy:
Blessings on thee, barefoot boy!

Oh for boyhood's painless play,
Sleep that wakes in laughing day,
Health that mocks the doctor's rules,
Knowledge never learned of schools,
Of the wild bee's morning chase,
Of the wild-flower's time and place,
Flight of fowl and habitude
Of the tenants of the wood;
How the tortoise bears his shell,
How the woodchuck digs his cell,
And the ground-mole sinks his well;
How the robin feeds her young,
How the oriole's nest is hung;
Where the whitest lilies blow,
Where the freshest berries grow,
Where the ground-nut trails its vine,
Where the wood-grape's clusters shine;
Of the black wasp's cunning way,
Mason of his walls of clay,
And the architectural plans
Of gray hornet artisans!
For, eschewing books and tasks,
Nature answers all he asks;

Hand in hand with her he walks,
Face to face with her he talks,
Part and parcel of her joy,—
Blessings on the barefoot boy!

Oh for boyhood's time of June,
Crowding years in one brief moon,
When all things I heard or saw,
Me, their master, waited for.
I was rich in flowers and trees,
Humming-birds and honey-bees;
For my sport the squirrel played,
Plied the snouted mole his spade;
For my taste the blackberry cone
Purpled over hedge and stone;
Laughed the brook for my delight
Through the day and through the night,
Whispering at the garden wall,
Talked with me from fall to fall;
Mine the sand-rimmed pickerel pond,
Mine the walnut slopes beyond,
Mine, on bending orchard trees,
Apples of Hesperides!
Still as my horizon grew,
Larger grew my riches too;
All the world I saw or knew
Seemed a complex Chinese toy,
Fashioned for a barefoot boy!

Oh for festal dainties spread,
Like my bowl of milk and bread;
Pewter spoon and bowl of wood,
On the door-stone, gray and rude!
O'er me, like a regal tent,
Cloudy-ribbed, the sunset bent,
Purple-curtained, fringed with gold,
Looped in many a wind-swung fold;
While for music came the play
Of the pied frogs' orchestra;
And, to light the noisy choir,
Lit the fly his lamp of fire.
I was monarch: pomp and joy
Waited on the barefoot boy!

Cheerily, then, my little man,
Live and laugh, as boyhood can!
Though the flinty slopes be hard,
Stubble-speared the new-mown sward,
Every morn shall lead thee through
Fresh baptisms of the dew;
Every evening from thy feet
Shall the cool wind kiss the heat:
All too soon these feet must hide
In the prison cells of pride,
Lose the freedom of the sod,
Like a colt's for work be shod,
Made to tread the mills of toil,
Up and down in ceaseless moil:
Happy if their track be found
Never on forbidden ground;
Happy if they sink not in
Quick and treacherous sands of sin.
Ah! that thou couldst know thy joy,
Ere it passes, barefoot boy!

John Greenleaf Whittier

