

Institute for Christian Teaching  
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**TEACHING POETRY IN ADVENTIST SCHOOLS**

by

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## **TEACHING POETRY IN ADVENTIST SCHOOLS**

R. Buckminster Fuller in his Critical Path (1981) quotes E.E. Cummings as saying, “a poet is somebody who feels,” and he (Fuller) concludes his foreword, “Explaining, experiencing, feeling, and — to the best of my ability — acting strictly and only on my individual intuition, I became impelled to write this book.”<sup>1</sup> It is unknown whether or not Fuller associates his intuition with a divine source or to what degree, if at all, his feelings are allowed to respond to divine impulses; but the notions of explaining, experiencing and feeling, seem entirely applicable to poetry in the teaching process.

The purpose of this essay is to reaffirm the relevance of poetry in the curriculum in Seventh-day Adventist schools, and more precisely to advance some pointers on the actual teaching process. Preliminary remarks will include definitions of poetry, an overview of the Seventh-day Adventist educational philosophy and recommendations for selecting poems, and some right and wrong attitudes in the presentation of poetry.

### **Definition**

A precise definition of poetry does not seem possible, but in as much as there *is* poetry one may attempt to identify it for the benefit of readers of this essay. For Lafcardio Hearn, “Poetry is something that should stir our emotions;” for Ruskin it is, “The suggestion by the imagination or of noble grounds for noble emotions;” for Poe, it is “The rhythmical creation of beauty.”<sup>2</sup> For Wordsworth, it is “Emotions recollected in tranquility” and “the spontaneous overflow of powerful

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<sup>1</sup>B.R. Fuller, Critical Path. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981

<sup>2</sup>J.D. Snider, I Love Books. Washington D.C.: Review & Herald, 1951

feelings.”<sup>3</sup> Shelley declares that poetry is “The expression of the imagination.”<sup>4</sup>

It will be observed that even for those whose opinions on poetry we ought to respect there are some differences of emphases. There seems to be, however, a tacit agreement that poetry falls within the realm of the emotional, the imaginative and the aesthetic as far as formal categories of knowledge and experience are concerned. My own contribution is that poetry is the spirit of beauty and truth captured in words, written or oral, which connects with one’s inherent capacities for joy, pleasure and wonder and thus excites the desire to explore further along these lines of reality.

One does not need to make a case for the relevance of poetry in the curriculum; but since within Adventism there is still some doubt, on the issue, presumably originating in the literature, it is considered reasonable to address the matter. It is bandied about that Ellen White, distinguished Adventist thought leader, expressly forbids the reading of fiction. If she did, without qualification, one would have to question her authenticity, for the Bible as an authoritative guide is prolific with instructive fictional stories, anecdotes and examples. No less a personage than Jesus Christ uses fictional illustrations to teach profound salvific truths. The story of the rich man and Lazarus is a case in point (Luke 16:19-31). We may even point out that the idea of the righteous dead going immediately to heaven (or Abraham’s bosom), and being able to communicate with the wicked in hell is not a biblical doctrine at all. What then is the truth about fiction in Adventist education? We need to be informed on the meaning of “fiction” and must not accept that it is to be equated with falsehood and immorality.

Ellen White is justified in saying, “Cheap works of fiction do not profit. They impart no real

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<sup>3</sup>William Wordsworth, Preface to Lyrical Ballads. 1800

<sup>4</sup>P.B.Shelley, A Defence of Poetry. London: Ginn, 1948. Pg. 67.

knowledge; they inspire no great and good purpose; they kindle in the heart no earnest desire for purity; they excite no soul hunger for righteousness.”<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere she remarks approvingly of Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress and recommends this fictional classic as profitable reading, calling it a “wonderful allegory” speaking “with a thrilling power to the hearts of men.”<sup>6</sup>

But the Seventh-day Adventist educator would be quite irresponsible were she to convey the impression that a selective awareness is unnecessary. What we read influences our thought and action, and a great deal of devilish ideas are available and is being vigorously promoted everywhere. This being so the teacher is to exercise care in selecting what her impressionable pupils will read.

The selection process is somewhat complicated but we can give ourselves some clear directions by asking and answering the following questions, for example:

1. What is the general principle for guiding our lives, especially in the intellectual and emotional spheres?
2. What does experience and observation teach regarding following or rejecting wise principles?
3. What is the responsibility of our Christian teachers in their presentation of poetry in our schools?
4. What, if any, are the rational views of past and contemporary Christian thinkers on choice and teaching of poetry?
5. What is the purpose of poetry in our schools?

One of the many principles for guiding us is Paul’s succinct counsel to the Philippians:

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<sup>5</sup>E.G.White, Fundamentals of Christian Education. Nashville: Southern Publishing, 1923

<sup>6</sup>E.G.White, The Great Controversy. Mountain View, California: Pacific Press, 1950

“Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are of good report ... think on these things.” (Philip.4:8) Along with the exploring, experiencing and feeling postulated by Fuller in the introduction one may add the desire for developing an authentic character. But to what end? This question compels us to consider the element of one’s worldview as an index to one’s vision and practice.

### **The Worldview Factor**

What is a world view and what is its justification? Briefly stated, a world view is one’s vision of the world beyond but not excluding the conventional, culture-specific delineations that become current with the passing of time and social regimes. “A people’s world view is their way of thinking about life and the world coupled with the values they set for themselves in the context of that way of thinking.”<sup>7</sup> and Holmes (1994) referring to the German Weltanschauung suggests four characteristics which undergird the Christian teacher’s rationale for teaching --- that is, influencing her and her pupils’ choices and attitude to life. First, “A world view is holistic or integrational; ... second exploratory, not a closed system ... third, likely to be pluralistic, ... fourth confessional and perspectival.”<sup>8</sup>

The Adventist world view agrees in principle with Holmes’ proposition, and it is this attitude to existence and the purpose of life for the human being that is fundamental to the whole question of teaching poetry in the Adventist school. Ellen White gives the basic Adventist statement on the purpose of education as “To restore in man the image of his Maker, to bring him back to the

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<sup>7</sup>Walsh and Middleton, The Transforming Vision. Downers Grove: Illinois 1984.

<sup>8</sup>A.F. Holmes, The Idea of a Christian College. Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1994.

perfection in which he was created, to promote the development of body mind and soul, that the divine purpose in his creation might be realized.”<sup>9</sup> This being accepted, the caution advanced about choice of material becomes even more crucial. We may extend the selection concern further and examine too the worldview of the writers whose works we recommend to our pupils, since the author’s works convey his beliefs and prejudices to some extent.

There are poets whose philosophy of life and of nature are palpably pagan, and whose works teach as they think. There are others who profess no fixed ideology and are simply decent moral humanists; then there are those whose confession is Christ-centered and transparent. In the first instance it is reasonable to advise a guarded approach to their writing more so than in the second; yet in the third category an uncritical acceptance is not recommended. The reason is not based on suspicion of the author’s veracity but on the need to exercise one’s critical judgement since final responsibility is one’s own to admit. Furthermore the search may be more for style, diction, emphasis, perspicacity, for example, and less for fundamental principles inherent in message and matter.

Before proceeding to the pedagogical aspects of presenting poetry in the classroom or school, a summary of the foregoing argument should be helpful. The paper has indicated in some detail the relevance of poetry in the school curriculum. It has attempted to define poetry as the use of words to stimulate feeling, to quicken the emotion to respond to beauty and truth, to urge the individual to wonder, explore and test what seem to be realities of existence. The discussion sought to promote the notion that a world view defines an individual’s life direction and lifestyle as well as the belief

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<sup>9</sup>E.G.White, Education. Mountain View, California: Pacific Press, 1952

system of a corporate group -- in this instance, the Seventh-day Adventist. Furthermore in this context, reference was made to biblical authority as well as to informed respectable non-canonical views. Finally the need for caution in selecting material for use in our schools was stressed.

The following section of the paper will be guided by these broad basic considerations but its focus will be on the actual pedagogical aspects of the subject --- teaching poetry in the Adventist school. One disclaimer is necessary, however, before this section begins: the focus will not be on the school generally but on the secondary level. Since there are so many levels of academic emphasis between the early years and the adult, one has to choose specifically within the parameters of this assignment. To attempt to speak to all groups would require another approach and much more space.

### **TEACHING POETRY**

In an age when technology with its visual and fingertip miracles threaten to overwhelm our basic proclivity for the world of the imaginative, the poet and the teacher of poetry might be daunted by the prospect of a diminishing audience. They need to take heart: the desires submerged are not capacities cauterized. The courageous, intelligent teacher therefore has a most promising challenge but must be aware of some right and wrong ways in presenting poetry. I am indebted to Blackburn (1966) for the following insights:

“The teacher is to avoid teaching poetry from a sense of duty and not from genuine enthusiasm and liking. The pupils will not be deceived by the teacher’s bold assault on the subject. Perhaps she enjoyed teaching poetry once but not anymore. There might have been a time when the pure nature lyric was in vogue. The teacher is not to assume it still is. A good poem, well chosen for a particular class may be spoilt by over-sentimental reading. It is a question of finding out what the

poem needs, and then using one's voice, intelligence and intuition to fulfil those needs."<sup>10</sup>

Other fallacies to avoid may be summarized as the 'heresy' of "poetry as word-music," "the temptation to falsify or sentimentalize the experience of childhood."<sup>11</sup>

The teacher who knows that "secondary school children often respond more fully and directly to well-chosen contemporary verse than to that of earlier periods,"<sup>12</sup> that children also want to have imaginative knowledge of the darker side of life and at an early age; and that two or three poems should often be presented in a single period on a few related themes has an advantage over the one who is not thus aware. Perhaps the following poems discussed, analyzed and applied will help to illustrate the positive points made just now and to uncover others as well. Louis Mac Niece's poem "Prayer Before Birth," for instance "expresses a conflict which, though it may persist for a lifetime, can be particularly acute in childhood and adolescence."<sup>13</sup>

I am not yet born; O hear me,

Let not the man who is beast or who thinks he is God

Come near me.

I am not yet born; O fill me

with strength against those who would freeze my

humanity, would dragoon me into a lethal automaton,

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<sup>10</sup>T. Blackburn (Ed.) Presenting Poetry. London: Methuen, 1966

<sup>11</sup>Ibid. Pg.128

<sup>12</sup>Ibid. Pg.2

<sup>13</sup>Ibid. Pg.9

would make me a cog in a machine, a thing with  
 one face, a thing, and against all those  
 who would dissipate me entirely, would  
 blow me like a thistledown hither and  
 thither or hither and thither  
 like water held in the  
 hands would spill me.

Let them not make a stone and let them not spill me,  
 Otherwise kill me.

Through the persona of an unidentified child ( a foetus?) the poem records with poignancy the difficulty of preserving wholeness and integrity in a corrupt unprincipled world that is often hostile to the free play of the human spirit. The relevance of the message of the poem to current practices of our “throw-away” society and devaluation of life is too stark and immediate to require much comment. It is sufficient to say that the poem is “profoundly disturbing” since it opens up the often suppressed dark fears of the vulnerable youth about his/her own physical security and psychological health in an ever widening and deepening environment of uncaring responses. Should a teacher not deal with this poem because of the powerful emotional resonance? This poem is an excellent choice in the hands of the prepared teacher to introduce values in social responsibility and how to address dilemmas which cannot be wished away. Such a poem, challenges the neat and comfortable little picture of the world and the self by which we try to ward off what is unknown and therefore

dangerous.

“Prayer Before Birth” could be introduced by “Timothy Winters” (Charles Causley) which is on the same theme but easier for children to accept because of its story form.

Timothy Winters comes to school

With eyes as wide as a football-pool

Ears like bombs and teeth like splinters:

A blitz of a boy is Timothy Winters.

His belly is white, his neck is dark,

And his hair is an exclamation mark.

His clothes are enough to scare a crow

And through his britches the blue winds blow.

When teacher talks he won't hear a word

And he shoots down dead the arithmetic-bird,

He licks the patterns off his plate

And he's not even heard of the Welfare State.

Timothy Winters has bloody feet

And he lives in a house on Suez Street,

He sleeps in a sack on the kitchen floor

And they say there aren't boys like him any more.

Old Man Winters likes his beer

And his missus ran off with a bombardier,

Grandma sits in the grate with a gin

And Timothy's dosed with an aspirin.

The Welfare Worker lies awake

But the law's as tricky as a ten-foot snake,

So Timothy Winters drinks his cup

And slowly goes on growing up.

At Morning Prayers the Master helves

For children less fortunate than ourselves,

And the loudest response in the room is when

Timothy Winters roars 'Amen!'

So come one angel, come on ten:

Timothy Winters says 'Amen

Amen amen amen amen.'

Timothy Winters, Lord.

Amen.

As in the preceding example the teacher can lead her class through a discussion on “ the ordeal of being human” in such a way as to redeem from cynicism, or to confirm the conviction that :like soldiers under fire who have a steady officer (God) they will not run away.”

Another poem, Auden’s “Epilogue” though not exactly like the previous two, deals similarly with conflict within the individual. This poem, more suited to older children, is difficult to comprehend but is immediately fascinating for its word-play among other features. With the help of the teacher they can move into its meaning.

‘O where are you going?’ Said reader to rider  
 ‘That valley is fatal where furnaces burn.  
 Yonder’s the midden whose odours will madden,  
 That gap is the grave where the tall return.’

‘O do you imagine’ said fearer to farer,  
 ‘That dusk will delay on your path to the pass,  
 Your diligent looking discover the lacking  
 Your footsteps feel from granite to grass?’

‘O what was that bird,’ said horror to hearer,  
 ‘Did you see that shape in the twisted trees?  
 Behind you swiftly the figure comes softly,  
 The spot on your skin is a shocking disease?’

'Out of this house' - said rider to reader

'Yours never will' - said farer to fearer

'They're looking for you' said hearer to horror

As he left them there, as he left them there.

The poem is to be read at least twice without comment but no other time with little guidance -- for instance to be aware of the dialogue, the skillful word-play, the shift from question to statement in the closing stanza, the repetition in the last line. The teacher will ask questions like

- Who are the speakers in each stanza?
- Are the questions asking for literal, factual information?
- Why do you say so?
- Is this a poem (a story) like "Timothy Winters"?
- What is different between them?
- There are strong symbolic elements here. What does this mean? What words are symbolic?

These questions are to stimulate careful reading and direct the pupils' critical insights. They can learn too that poetry is an art form with much value for self-analysis and for helping them to form a vision of the world.

The teacher will have the last word. She will very briefly personify 'farer' and 'fearer' and 'horror' and the rest as disturbed and disturbing states of mind -- as parts of the menace of which the world is full. And she will help her children to believe that one can escape from 'the house of nightmare and the forest of past conditioning and transcend the anxieties and leave them there'. One lesson common to all these poems is that we are not circumscribed by our material environment nor

is our destiny time-bound.

Hitherto the emphasis in the specific selections treated has been on the pupil's psychological development and his capacity and responsibility to respond positively to the darker realities of his environment. We now turn to poetry which does not contradict this emphasis but adds another dimension to the poetic discussion -- Religious poetry.

### **Religious Poetry**

If we assume that the chief purpose of poetry in general and of the poetry lesson in particular is to instruct by calling upon the imaginative and emotional capacities we can see why in the "schools of the prophets" poetry was one of "the chief subjects."<sup>14</sup> Adventists believe that their schools are to reflect the model founded by Samuel in the Old Testament insofar as such modeling is possible and is consistent with the realities of today. Then as now the curriculum was holistic; all subjects shared the common objective of building character along moral lines and for the individual to engage in gospel ministry. It is understandable therefore, why the school administration will support the teacher in procuring material which does not apologize for its moral religious aims.

In this regard the teacher has an opportunity to dispel the myth that poetry must rhyme or even share the rhythmic patterns that are traditional in English versification -- the consecutive and alternate rhyming, the iambic meter, the heroic couplet of the neoclassical writers, for instance. This preliminary explanation will very likely be necessary since most pupils would not otherwise be disposed to accept the Bible as literature, nor the Psalms and other parts as poetry.

The Bible-poetry lesson is to begin with prayer and an atmosphere of reverence is to pervade the

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<sup>14</sup>E.G. White, Education. Mountain View, California: Pacific Press, 1952.

whole exercise. This is not to suggest that some of appropriate humour, dialogue, movement and such like active participation is to be prohibited, but that lessons of serious implications are being communicated.

The book of Psalms is so abundantly poetic that it is not necessary here to list examples for study. It is better to suggest or even to remind the teacher that there are Psalms that relate to all aspects of our needs -- emotional and otherwise. It could be profitable for the class to engage in a project to find particular Psalms, or parts of longer ones, to fit under particular headings. They could, at the end of a term or semester, contribute a copy if done as a class project, or copies if done in separate groups, to the school library. The experience could have a lasting impact on the pupils and become part of the ethos-enhancing character of the school.

Throughout the Bible, but mostly in the Old Testament, are poetic utterances. Ellen White points out that "The earliest as well as the most sublime of poetic utterances known to man are found in the Scriptures. Before the oldest of the world's poets had sung, the shepherd of Midian recorded those words of God to Job -- in their majesty unequalled, unapproached, by the loftiest productions of human genius. (See Job 38:4-27) <sup>15</sup> Other fruitful sources are the prophetic books, the Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, the books of the Pentateuch. This is a mere hint of what is available

Here is a recommendation, strongly urges, that the literature and Bible teacher can complement each other's efforts and enhance each other's knowledge base by cooperating in this exercise of teaching poetry from the Bible. Certainly, to communicate moral values will be an objective, perhaps the principal one ultimately; but elements such as imagery, figures of speech, assonance and

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid. Pg.159

resonance, feelings of sympathy and empathy conveyed in the overall poetic message and the connectedness of all truths will be worth including somewhere in the lesson presentation.

The question arises: What about requiring pupils to memorize poems -- learning poems by heart? And what about literature study for external examinations? The answers are controversial. This writer shares the view held by J.H. Walsh: "As a general thing it may be said that if poetry really matters to a child, he learns it with little effort or with none at all; if it does not matter to him, he learns it under pressure and forgets it as soon as he can."<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the teachers own commitment and involvement in poetry and in her task of teaching it constitute the inspiration for the pupil's desire to learn poems by heart, as we say.

### **Poetry for Examinations**

In many areas of the world Adventist schools prepare students for external, public examinations and often the examination syllabus is prepared for the school externally. The Adventist teacher may find some problems here in that the books and particular poems may not be acceptable to the school's philosophical position. What is to be done? If too many poems are objectionable as to jeopardize the pupils chance of passing her examinations on the rest, literature, as an examination subject might have to be dropped. However, literature does not have to be discontinued in the school nor in that particular upper form or class. The course can still be conducted with even greater profit, it may be said, than within the limits imposed by external examination requirement.

Another option is to request that the school submit its own list of poems which must, of course,

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<sup>16</sup>J.H. Walsh, Teaching English. London: Heinemann, 1991

be comparable in level of challenge and those other characteristics required by the examination rubric. If this is accepted the students will have the opportunity to receive external credit (pass grade) without violating the ethical standards of their school.

## **Conclusion**

This paper was limited by specific page requirement and other factors pertinent to the Seminar under whose auspices it was assigned, hence some relevant elements that the reader would appreciate are not included. The paper, however, has indicated and developed the notion that poetry belongs to the Adventist academic curriculum as an important subject. It also attempted to define poetry as an emotional and imaginative response to the material and invisible world. It asserted that one's worldview colours and defines this response hence the Adventist teacher is responsible to select her material and teach within the context of the Adventist bible-based world-view. More specifically and from a strictly pedagogical perspective the poem is to be allowed to reveal itself by being read several times and with a minimum of questions by the teacher. The teacher is to avoid using the poem as a prologue or text for some other interest lest the feel and experience of poetry be lost.

Tacitly, this essay looked at secular poetry without naming it as such and without bias, and examined its potential for helping the pupil to interpret and adjust to and cope with some of life's unavoidable dilemma. It also refers to Bible poetry and justifies its study on the basis of its importance in character development for service in this world and for gospel ministry particularly.

If this composition has stirs unprejudiced critical discussion, or urges further reading and research, if it has encourages or initiates some interest in poetry either as pleasure for oneself or as a subject to pursue formally with others, and if it helps someone to clarify her doubt about the place of poetry

**among the other authentic disciplines in the Adventist school this writer will feel entirely rewarded.**

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