

*'They Flash Upon That Inward Eye':  
Poetry Recitation and American Readers*

JOAN SHELLEY RUBIN

THE SCENE is familiar: a boy stands uneasily at the front of a classroom, eyes lowered, shoulders sagging. Beside him, the teacher, a spinster with a stern exterior and a heart of gold, instructs him to take his hands out of his pockets and stand up straight. The recitation begins. 'I think that I shall never see . . .,' the boy mumbles, continuing on in a monotone until, vastly relieved, he returns to his seat. The teacher summons the next victim, a beribboned girl who completes her far more poised performance with a curtsy.

So widely held is that image of the schoolroom poetry recitation, in fact, that we are prone to assume the transparency of the practice. One measure of its status as a stock feature of cultural memory is its passage into parody: Who does not know 'The boy stood on the burning deck, eating peanuts by the peck?' Yet the recitation, for all its predictable associations, may still yield important lessons for historians. An occasion for intimacy (lovers dreamily sharing sonnets with one another), poetry reading also entails a substantial public dimension; in the United States between 1917 and 1950, for example, it occurred at sites ranging from radio broadcasts to Girl Scout campfires. Although, beginning in the late nineteenth century, a succession of literary critics

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bemoaned a 'decline' in the genre, those sites sustained ongoing traditions of engagement with poetic texts. The school setting exerted particular influence because there, despite the vicissitudes of production and marketing, everyone read verse every year. Thus the recitation affords scholars in the history of the book an especially good location from which to discern the connections between the uses of print and cultural values.

One lesson, which I have explored at length elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> emerges from tracing the 'steady sellers' within the poetry curriculum: the works that teachers assigned time after time. As an inventory of thirty state or local courses of study makes clear, the paramount feature of elementary and high school poetry instruction in the interwar era was the dominance of nineteenth-century verse.<sup>2</sup> The prescribed texts in 1935 were frequently the same ones tested on college entrance examinations in 1890: Bryant's 'Thanatopsis,' Lowell's 'The Vision of Sir Launfal,' Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,' Longfellow's 'Evangeline.' Writing in 1925, the educator Hughes Mearns observed: 'For a half century *The Lady of the Lake* . . . has been almost a sacred book.'<sup>3</sup> Arnold's 'Sohrab and Rustum,' Whittier's 'Snow-bound,' and Bryant's 'To a Waterfowl' were likewise ubiquitous. Other standard titles in the mid-twentieth century included Kipling's 'If,' Henley's 'Invictus' ('I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul'), and Wordsworth's 'Daffodils.' The salient point is that students not only continued to read large quantities of Longfellow, Bryant, Holmes, Browning, Kipling, and Tennyson but also did so well after the so-called 'new poets' of the 'teens—Amy Lowell, Vachel Lindsay, Robert Frost, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Carl Sandburg, among others—had proclaimed a radical break with the past.

1. See Joan Shelley Rubin, "'Listen, My Children': Poetry Reading in American Schools, 1875-1950,' in Karen Halttunen and Lewis Perry, eds., *Moral Problems in American Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, forthcoming).

2. The sample was drawn from the course of study collection at Milbank Memorial Library, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City.

3. Hughes Mearns, *Creative Youth: How a School Environment Set Free the Creative Spirit* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1925), 118-19.

By the same token, many syllabi exhibited a bounded but noteworthy eclecticism. Antebellum American poems stood side by side with Masfield's 'Sea Fever,' Noyes's 'The Highwayman,' and of course Kilmer's 'Trees,' to name three favorites written since the late nineteenth century. Where teacher interest was strong and institutional constraints minimal, certain specimens of early modernism—notably Frost's 'Birches,' Lowell's 'Patterns,' Millay's 'Renascence,' and Sandburg's 'Fog'—made their way into the classroom. Furthermore, while scholars have segregated 'high' and 'popular' modernists from nineteenth-century romantics and authors of sentimental verse, differentiating them in terms of artistic quality, schoolchildren encountered many or all of those categories together. Thus the recitation provides a graphic illustration of the discrepancy between textual production and consumption at any given time; it suggests the need to differentiate literary history, always written as an account of the new, from the history of reading, and in turn to depict the culture of a given era in terms of readers' encounters with a mixture of conventional forms and stylistic innovations, domestic products and foreign imports, 'serious' writing and 'lighter' works.

Shifting the spotlight to the pedagogical objectives attending poetry reading in school similarly reveals continuity as well as change. Three prevailing purposes which, as early as the 1870s, justified the inclusion of verse in the curriculum survived hand in hand with nineteenth-century texts at least through the 1930s. One, evident in the numerous 'pieces' students learned before national holidays, was the enhancement of patriotism. Two other aims closely affiliated poetry reading with religious instruction: the cultivation of moral sense and the desire to equip the young with memorized works that could provide 'comfort, guidance, and sympathy' throughout life.<sup>4</sup>

In the late 1800s the understanding that schoolroom poetry

4. W. H. Lambert, *Memory Gems: Graded Selections in Prose and Verse for the Use of Schools* (Boston: Ginn, Heath & Co., 1883), 1.

could impart moral precepts governed both the content and the form of the recitation. Courses of study drew heavily on British romantics who emphasized Christian love. To the extent that reading such writers encouraged the outpouring of emotion, the poetry curriculum thus reiterated the emphasis on training the heart that Ruth Miller Elson detected in schoolbooks of the period generally. At the same time, however, nineteenth-century teachers often presented grammar, spelling, and vocabulary through literary examples. They also devoted significant attention to technical aspects of rhythm and rhyme. Those subjects implicitly made reading a poem equivalent to studying it—parsing lines, scanning metre, deciphering unfamiliar words. Such procedures tended to fragment a poem and minimize its mood; they could even obscure its moral message. Yet the structure of the exercise itself reinforced certain virtuous qualities: diligence, thoroughness, hard work. Moreover, educators attributed moral value to the drill that facilitated memorization; the catechism-like repetition of poetic texts, they believed, strengthened the ‘warp and woof of character.’<sup>5</sup>

By the early twentieth century some pedagogues, aware of the drawbacks of rote learning, were urging English teachers to nurture the ‘spiritual’ as well as ‘intellectual and sympathetic comprehension’ of poetry. Such figures as Harvard professor of education Charles Swain Thomas and Arthur H. R. Fairchild advocated elucidating a work’s dominant feeling as part of an effort to ‘stimulate’ pupils’ ‘desire for noble living.’ Nevertheless Thomas chiefly insisted on intensive interrogation of texts in order to ‘come as closely as possible into coincident thinking with the poet.’ He told his own students to ‘check every word that was not perfectly clear, master every obscure reference, and determine the grammatical relationship of each word, phrase, and clause to its neighbors.’ Mastery was incompatible with ‘laziness’; in Thomas’s view, ‘to fall into the habit of getting only a part of the meaning is to

5. W. H. Williams, *Memory Gems for School and Home* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1907), v.

weaken all mental discipline and vigor.' Similarly, Fairchild announced in 1914, 'The true enjoyment of poetry demands effort, steadiness of purpose, sometimes even pain, to achieve it.' Balancing thought and emotion, these reform-minded educators thus continued to link reading practice and moral development.<sup>6</sup>

Because of its connections to elocution and oratory, the performance component of the recitation buttressed its putative moral benefits. Like English teachers, nineteenth-century elocutionists were committed to instilling virtue. Animated in part by an ideal of the eloquent citizen, they assumed that vocal training strengthened character and ethical judgment. (Social success was a by-product of the process.) By 1920 speech as an academic discipline was in transition: advocates of, first, 'expression' and, later, 'oral interpretation' were rejecting their predecessors' preoccupation with gesture and display. Critical of what they saw as the excesses of elocution, their goal was less moral cultivation than the stimulation of speakers' mental and emotional capacities through exposure to texts as a whole. Still, along with other pedagogues, early twentieth-century speech professionals considered the recitation an especially suitable vehicle for conveying the value of discipline. As one 'expressionist' explained in 1917, oral performance precluded 'superficial attention' and 'snap judgment.' The same writer noted that because poetry was 'the highest and finest type' of literature, proper verse recitation was 'one of the most effective means of bringing the voice under control and of making it responsive to thought, imagination, and feeling.'<sup>7</sup>

6. Charles Swain Thomas, *The Teaching of English in the Secondary School* (1917; rev. ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927), 6-7, 28-32, 224; Arthur H. R. Fairchild, *The Teaching of Poetry in the High School* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 19-20, 164.

7. Nan Johnson, 'The Popularization of Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric: Elocution and the Private Learner,' in *Oratorical Culture in Nineteenth-Century America: Transformations in the Theory and Practice of Rhetoric*, ed. Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 157; Paul C. Edwards, 'The Rise of Expression,' in *Performance of Literature in Historical Perspectives*, ed. David W. Thompson (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983), 529-48; Lee Emerson Bassett, *Handbook of Oral Reading* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917), 4, 114. See also Wayland Maxfield Parrish, *Reading Aloud: A Technique in the Interpretation of Literature* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1933) and H. H. Fuller and Andrew Thomas Weaver, *How to Read Aloud: A Guide to Interpretive Reading* (New York: Silver, Burdett, 1935).

Of course in actuality teachers were free to ignore experts' pleas to have students analyze and perform entire poems. In fact, as the proponents of oral interpretation knew all too well, one of the chief sources of the schoolroom recitation—the 'memory gem' collection—undermined that directive. Widely used between 1875 and 1925, these pamphlets provided instructors with brief prose excerpts, abridgements of long poems, and short verse. On a practical level, 'memory gem' anthologies compensated for gaps in school libraries. They also perpetuated in the twentieth century the commonplace book or scrapbook traditions that had flourished earlier. If they licensed a short-cut to moral sense, however, 'memory gem' compendia nevertheless ostensibly fulfilled the third overarching purpose of the poetry curriculum: the transmission of ideals and images in a form which students could retrieve over the course of a lifetime. Educators and compilers of 'memory gems' regarded the mind as a storehouse; the act of memorizing snippets of verse filled it with 'treasures' upon which readers could later draw for inspiration or solace. Moreover, the tropes of jewels and riches, which lasted even after the phrase 'memory gem' fell out of fashion, performed other functions: they connected poetry in school both to commodity exchange and to the glittering enticements of the marketplace about which Jackson Lears has written.<sup>8</sup>

Even as the recitation in the interwar period sustained longstanding reasons for the practice, however, the advent of progressive education freighted poetry reading with a competing mission: the encouragement of self-expression. Among Deweyite teachers, that aim, by the 1920s, had unseated the convictions that learning verse required the dissection of meaning and that education was a process of storage. In devising instead the so-called 'experience' curriculum, progressive pedagogues diverged from earlier commentators on both silent reading and elocution by making emotion paramount. One representative progressive English teacher complained in 1933 that instructors who 'emphasize the ele-

8. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance* (New York: Basic, 1994).

ment of comprehension, and fail to recognize the existence of apprehension . . . preclude any possibility of encouraging feeling without knowledge'—a possibility he decidedly welcomed. While it retained a measure of Lowell and Longfellow, the 'experience' curriculum replaced decoding texts with a model of submission to them. Students were to 'revel' in poetry, about which 'there was nothing inherently hard.' Forced memorization and drill were anathema in this scheme; rather, the recitation became an occasion for heightening and sharing the immediacy of sensory perception. 'We fail entirely in teaching poetry,' another specialist in English maintained in 1930, 'if our students do not feel poetic language as the spontaneous inspiration from a poetic glimpse.'<sup>9</sup>

The progressive educators' stance retained a moral and even a political function, because it promised to make poetry available to a changing high school population that included 'boys of coarse fibre.' In addition, the revaluation of oral performance fed the modern American's desire to project an appealing image; by 1940, one speech textbook author even likened correctly reciting a poem to brushing one's teeth or using dandruff shampoo. But, in any event, the progressives' romantic, sentimental, and sometimes erotic mode of reading also highlights a second lesson of the recitation: that it is insufficient to describe the curriculum (or any canon) without also examining how methods of reading the same titles could serve different needs and values, in this case both prudence and sensual surrender, mental discipline and self-expression. One might add that the coexistence of those values signals the survival in American culture of tendencies antithetical to the toughmindedness or 'terrible honesty' that Ann Douglass has recently attributed to the United States after World War I.<sup>10</sup>

9. Howard Francis Seely, *Enjoying Poetry in School* (Richmond: Johnson, 1931), 11, 26; John Hooper, *Poetry in the New Curriculum* (Brattleboro, Vt.: Stephen Daye Press, 1932), 38; Virginia J. Craig, *The Teaching of High School English* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1930), 69.

10. Sterling Andrus Leonard, *Essential Principles of Teaching Reading and Literature* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1922), 125; Argus Tresidder, *Reading to Others* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1940), 1; Ann Douglass, *Terrible Honesty* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995).

The same conclusions result from a more focused look at the recitation as a site for the dissemination of early modernist American verse. In 1912, as Henry May has argued, the 'new poetry' symbolized the 'end of American innocence'; it was part and parcel of a self-conscious rebellion against literary or moral convention.<sup>11</sup> How, one might ask (as I have in a separate essay<sup>12</sup>) did that current of opposition to the cultural mainstream subsequently become absorbed into it? The question is not only which examples of 'new poetry' teachers assigned, and on what basis (for instance, Frost was routinely treated as a regionalist) but to what extent texts picked up different ideological valences in the process of popularization. For example, in the 1930s, when educators organized group recitations in the form of the verse-speaking choir, they imposed upon poetry deliberately at odds with accepted language or behavior (e.g., the work of Millay, Edward Arlington Robinson, or Sandburg) the unrebelling rhetoric not only of personal growth but also of Americanization and social progress. In short, the capacity of poetry reading in school both to popularize and to neutralize modernist impulses argues that conceptualizing literary history as a series of reorientations in sensibility, or even in the conditions of authorship, does not account for the susceptibility of texts to a range of cultural preoccupations that might lead readers to sustain, challenge, or respond ambivalently to those reorientations.

However fruitful the examination of the recitation's curricular and pedagogical foundations, though, the courses of study and allied writings educators produced do not, for the most part, directly address the effects on students of memorizing, reciting, and recalling poetry. To label such materials merely prescriptive is somewhat misleading, because teachers are themselves a population of readers, yet it seemed worthwhile to gather first-person

11. Henry May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964).

12. I develop these points in 'The New Poetry in Public,' an essay in *Modernism in the United States*, edited by Townsend Ludington (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming).

accounts from students who actually carried out educators' directives.<sup>13</sup> An 'Author's Query' I inserted into the *New York Times Book Review*, which appeared on April 16, 1995, generated a rich archive for investigating the pupil's experience. Four hundred seventy-nine readers replied to the invitation to describe the poems they had recited in school between 1917 and 1950, as well as to comment on what the task meant to them at the time and later in life.

Not a scientific sample, the respondents obviously reflected the readership of the *Times*. Their current residences were concentrated in the northeastern United States. The biggest single group (forty or so) had attended New York City public elementary and high schools. Nevertheless, many had been educated elsewhere: in one-room North Dakota schoolhouses, California parochial institutions, Midwestern state teachers' college laboratory schools. As a consequence of the dates in the query, informants were predominantly between sixty-five and eighty-five years of age, with a few nonagenarians for good measure. The loneliness from which older people often suffer may partly explain the volume and detail of most responses; while a handful wrote postcards, many more sent three or four single-spaced pages, and two recorded tapes. Jews (to judge from surnames), pre-collegiate English teachers, and academics were disproportionately represented. Yet the sample was sufficiently diverse that the largest subset (the New Yorkers) constituted less than ten percent of the total. Given the stereotype that girls were better at reciting than boys, the number of men who answered the query (206) was surprisingly close to the number of women (273)—both groups exhibiting the same enthusiasm. To be sure, twenty-two respondents condemned poetry reading in school, about equally divided by gender. Within the negative group, almost a third

13. For an overview of studies that investigate the uses of reading, see David D. Hall, 'Readers and Reading in America: Historical and Critical Perspectives,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 103, 2 (1994): 337-57. A pioneering example of such scholarship is Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

blamed the teacher's unanalytical approach—both mindless drill and the 'apprehension' that had been Progressives' point of pride—for their disaffection. 'Poetry was stuffed down our throats,' a woman exclaimed. 'I hated having to spend Sundays memorizing something I thought of as pretty stupid, uninteresting, and meaningless.'<sup>14</sup> Like the authors of fan letters, however, overwhelmingly the people who took the trouble to write relished learning poems, attending school, reminiscing about those activities, or all three. This may be the place to say that many respondents seemed relieved that, at an advanced age, they could recall anything at all; as one disarmingly phrased it, 'I've enjoyed remembering what I remember.'<sup>15</sup>

In terms of titles cited, the great majority of the letters—perhaps eight out of ten—are, at first glance, unremarkable, in the sense that they merely replicate state and local syllabi, documenting the emphasis on texts written before 1900. A reader educated in rural Michigan observed that in some grades she realized that her poetry book had belonged to her mother when she had attended school before the turn of the century.<sup>16</sup> The poems most commonly mentioned were identical to the ones regularly prescribed. The high correlation between courses of study and readers' accounts is, however, not without interest, because, as educational historians rightly insist, one cannot assume that teachers actually delivered what administrators dictated.

The letters also substantiate the eclecticism that governed curricula to varying degrees. Here the responses to the query are somewhat more instructive than printed syllabi, because they document cases in which the same individuals read across intellectual levels regardless of their social background. For example, one informant, leafing through a tattered copy of *My Poetry Book* (1934), commented on the presence of Longfellow, Sandburg,

14. Bettie L. Snyder, Sharon, Conn., Apr. 19, 1995. All of the responses to the query are in my possession. I am grateful to those informants whose letters I quote directly for their permission to do so.

15. Barbara Kuter, Amber, Penn., May 11, 1995.

16. This reader did not wish to be identified publicly.

Whitman, Field, Lear, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Emerson. Another, a parochial school student in upstate New York in the early 1930s, called Frost an 'especially great favorite,' but noted as well his fondness for Robert Service, Grantland Rice, Kipling, Kilmer, and Shakespeare.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the letters reveal a developing consciousness of the processes of canonization. A respondent who, between 1931 and 1934, had relied on a compilation entitled *One Hundred and One Famous Poems*, was forcibly introduced to categories of taste when a university professor downgraded him for performing a selection from James Whitcomb Riley in a recitation contest. So did a boy who received a 'D' from a teacher 'appalled' by his choice of a humorous poem about a pig and a drunk. A reader from Massachusetts who eventually earned a Ph.D. in English literature observed, 'I realized that the poems [the teacher] had made us memorize were considered second rate . . . and sentimental.' For a student at Detroit's Edgar A. Guest School, whose 'lower-middle-class immigrant family . . . knew the difference between art and kitsch,' the recognition of cultural hierarchy came early.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, as Victor Nell has put it, because 'earlier tastes do not wither and die as more refined appetites develop,' such readers became, over time, repositories of both the high and the popular—aware of, but not constrained by, a shifting boundary between them.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, an inventory of remembered titles underscores that, irrespective of students' geographical and social location, American schoolchildren by the early twentieth century received a nation-

17. Doris K. Goga, Mayfield Village, Ohio, Apr. 30, 1995; Edward J. Brennan, Copake, N.Y., May 24, 1995. The reading of Shakespeare seems to me to warrant separate treatment, and does not figure in my analysis here. In several essays, Barbara Sicherman has argued for the eclectic quality of American women's reading; see especially "'Sense and Sensibility": A Case Study of Women's Reading in Late-Victorian America,' in *Reading in America*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 201–25 and 'Reading and Ambition: M. Carey Thomas and Female Heroism,' *American Quarterly* 65 (1993): 73–103.

18. Richard Phelan, McGregor, Tex., May 30, 1995; Arthur E. Cohen, Keene, N.H., Apr. 15, 1995; Jane E. Lewin, Bethesda, Md., May 25, 1995; Arlynn Nellhaus, Jerusalem, Israel, June 22, 1995.

19. Victor Nell, *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 5.

ally standardized education. It goes without saying that everyone may not have read Longfellow or Bryant in the same way, but they encountered identical definitions of what an educated American should know. A few respondents—a Catholic faced with the King James Bible, a farm boy schooled in agricultural rhythms confronted with 'Thanatopsis,' a daughter of immigrants who pronounced the lines 'It takes a heap o' livin' to make a house a home' ironic for children whose homes had been destroyed—registered dismay at the discrepancy between what they read and how they lived. 'Pilgrims and New England Coasts didn't mean a whole lot then to an elementary school student growing up in . . . McLean, Virginia,' said one.<sup>20</sup> But these were exceptions. Like the 1920s movie-goers David Nasaw has portrayed in *Going Out*, second-generation immigrants in particular could regard exposure to a national culture as liberating rather than as oppressive.<sup>21</sup> Respondents whose parents had migrated from Armenia, Greece, Italy, or eastern Europe expressed gratitude to teachers who helped them feel more 'American.'<sup>22</sup> Well aware of the disjuncture between his lower-middle-class Jewish household in St. Louis and the 'rather determinedly Protestant' women who taught him, one man altered the words of 'Barbara Frietchie' to 'produce what I fancied to be a Jewish hero': for the lines 'The clustered spires of Frederick stand / Green-walled by the hills of Maryland,' he substituted a character named 'Greenwald.' Yet he remembered with 'love and reverence' his teachers' dutiful efforts 'to inculcate us with American values, culture, ideas.' Similarly, the daughter of an Italian immigrant warmly described a 1909 photograph of her mother standing on a pedestal, bouquet in hand, after winning a school prize for recitation. In the daughter's eyes, the event signaled her mother's entrance into the American

20. Robert R. Ledbetter, Cheverly, Md., May 6, 1995; Norma Marder, Champaign, Ill., Apr. 17, 1995; Joel Eigen, Norristown, Penn., Apr. 15, 1995.

21. David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic, 1993).

22. Susan Smpadian, New York, N.Y., Apr. 20, 1995; George Michaels, Manasquan, N.J., Apr. 20, 1995.

mainstream; subsequently she 'passed as Irish' to get a job, and ultimately 'made it.'<sup>23</sup> Poetry reading here was synonymous with glimpsing another world—not the ethereal realm idealist verse portrayed but, rather, what a reader called the sphere of the 'attractive, well-groomed rich.' As he explained, 'I grew up during the depression, the child of immigrant parents. At that time, I perceived everything about my life as ugly—the drab tenement apartment in which I slept on a sofa in a cluttered dark parlour. [*sic*], the scarred furniture, the worn clothes we wore.' Lowell's 'The Vision of Sir Launfal' 'made me think "I, too, could experience beauty. . . ."' The almost formulaic quality of that remark makes one wonder whether the writer has superimposed a retrospective or borrowed view on more ambivalent perceptions, yet the psychological reality behind the comment simply cannot be dismissed as a sign of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant hegemony either.<sup>24</sup>

To turn from content to classroom procedure, respondents confirmed that oral poetry reading occurred in a range of formats reflecting both the older approaches and Progressive innovations educators mandated. Their replies corroborated that, in many schools, the recitation was incidental to—or at least accompanied—other instructional goals, such as the teaching of handwriting. As was true in the nineteenth century, spellers continued to include poems in the back. A reader who attended a small-town Pennsylvania elementary school in the late 1940s recalled the 'personal growth leaflet' which supplied verses for students to memorize throughout the year; the contents always included a psalm on the first page, a number of patriotic rhymes throughout, and a selection of other poetry, none more recent than Kipling's. On some report cards, students received a grade for memorization skills, which poetry reading was supposed to sharpen. 'When I attended elementary school,' an informant indicated, 'we had a

23. Charles H. Gold, Evanston, Ill., Apr. 17, 1995; Betty P. Fotis, Tucson, Ariz., June 4, 1995.

24. Leonard Grumbach, Roslyn, N.Y., June 29, 1995.

daily period devoted to "memory" and we had to recite "memory gems" which had been assigned the day before.' In the commonplace book tradition, but to provide an occasion for 'art' as well, teachers required students to copy verses into journals and to illustrate them.<sup>25</sup>

The recitation itself took place with varying frequency: at the beginning of each day, once a week, biweekly, every month. A favored time was Friday afternoon, a carryover from a nineteenth-century custom; the scheduling suggests an ideal of oral performance as end-of-the-week festivity and release from routine. By contrast, disciplinarians might employ memorizing and reciting poetry as a punishment for misbehavior. One public-school teacher required students to recite Bible verses before she would dismiss them for the weekend. Less coercively, both schools and civic organizations sponsored competitions of the sort mentioned above. Like the declamation and elocution contests with which they overlapped, these events offered prizes to those who could recite the greatest number of lines or perform with the most finesse. 'Poetry meets' such as those sponsored by the Texas Interscholastic League during the 1930s enabled participants from different locales to mingle with one another. One respondent, who attended a small-town Wisconsin high school in the early 1940s, reported that state speech contests in 'interpretive reading' and 'choral reading' helped 'lead me to a world beyond the backwater slough in which I lived.' The Literary Explorers Club, a venture of the 1930s that required members to memorize twenty-five poems from a 'Treasure Chest' in order to advance through 'degrees,' also apparently linked students to a national network.<sup>26</sup>

These structural facets of reading verse in school suggest that,

25. Adele Fasick, Etobicoke, Ontario, Apr. 30, 1995; Nancy Levine, Washington, D.C., Apr. 16, 1995; Renee L. Ritz, Syosset, N.Y., Apr. 24, 1995; Lawrence Feigenbaum, Brooklyn, N.Y., Apr. 20, 1995.

26. George M. Weller, Owensboro, Ky., Apr. 19, 1995; Barbara Beebe, Friendship, Me., May 29, 1995; Richard Phelan, McGregor, Tex., May 30, 1995; Richard H. Freeman, Washington, D.C., Apr. 17, 1995; Edith D. Weber, Augusta, Me., May 14, 1995.

notwithstanding the themes of Christian idealism or natural beauty characterizing many of the memorized texts, the techniques by which students mastered them were well suited to imparting the skills necessary for success within industrial capitalism. Poetry reading thus mirrored the tensions inherent in public education from the start: between the classroom as a refuge from competitive individualism and as a site of preparation for it. In any event, readers retrospectively judged recitation exercises—the term itself suggests an instrumental function—a lifelong aid in getting ahead. The notion that memorization provided ‘mental training,’ a secondary goal for many educators, assumed primary importance for both men and women, who reported deriving ‘confidence’ from the process as well. ‘I have never in subsequent years,’ one prize elocutionist asserted, ‘felt any reticence or undue nervousness about addressing large or small audiences.’ (His reward was a solid brass bust of Shakespeare which his mother used as a doorstop.) Hamlin Garland’s lines about manly triumph (‘Do you fear the force of the wind?’) would ‘flash into my thoughts,’ a company president indicated, both as a newspaper boy and, years later, ‘before going into a corporate boardroom.’<sup>27</sup>

Other uses of poetry learned in school were less social and more solitary, less practical and more contemplative (while, as the glimpse of immigrant families has already revealed, still others were social and practical in different ways). Before proceeding to chart that set of additional functions, however, it is worth pausing to consider how even those instances just cited defy easy classification. In the Garland case, the poem’s message about being a man is integral to its function as executive weaponry; by contrast, for the cultivation of mental agility or confidence, almost any lines will do. One might thus distinguish applications extraneous to the substance, import, or sound of the text from those that depend on its message or form. The distinction is ad-

27. Gertrude Reif Hughes, Middletown, Conn., Apr. 23, 1995; Jim Scott, Dearborn, Mich., July 22, 1995; Harold C. Cannon, Greenfield Center, N.Y., Apr. 22, 1995; John A. Nelson, Saratoga Springs, N.Y., Apr. 17, 1995.

mittedly fuzzy, because one may sometimes invoke a poem in a setting that seems utterly at odds with its manifest content but which nevertheless permits the reader to experience its emotional impact. For example, a woman who reported that recalling 'Daffodils' helped her endure an abortion was not primarily engaged in contemplating the delights of nature, yet the image of dancing flowers may have furnished her the same solace, on the operating table, that the poet achieved on his 'couch.'<sup>28</sup> In other words, the poem may have served as more than an anaesthetic, although it is difficult to tell from the reader's circumscribed remarks how much Wordsworth's meaning mattered. Moreover, even when the words of a text appear to have been entirely extraneous to their use, respondents were never completely indifferent to what they were saying. Although a few conceded that they could be caught up in 'lulling' or 'stirring' rhythms without understanding a poem's sense, modernist obscurity defined a border most readers would not cross even when using poetry for purposes dissociated from the text.<sup>29</sup>

Sorting readers' practices into 'extraneous' and 'integral' uses nevertheless furnishes the historian of the book a rough organizing principle. In the former category belong several more instances of recitation as anaesthetic or diversion: among them, to fall asleep or to stay awake,<sup>30</sup> provide relief from dental or medical procedures,<sup>31</sup> offset 'gloom' or stress,<sup>32</sup> alleviate boredom,<sup>33</sup> break obsessive rumination,<sup>34</sup> get through a plane ride,<sup>35</sup> over-

28. Frederica Fox Winter, Rockville, Md., Apr. 16, 1995.

29. e.g., Joan D. Ensor, West Redding, Conn., May 2, 1995.

30. Solita Sheehan, Brooklyn, N.Y., Apr. 20, 1995; Howell D. Boyd, San Antonio, Tex., June 15, 1995; Alice Nichols, Damariscotta, Me., Apr. 25, 1995; Enid Pensack, Trenton, N.J., Apr. 21, 1995; Howard Goldberger, Katonah, N.Y., Apr. 16, 1995; Robert L. Bancroft, Amherst, Mass., Apr. 19, 1995; James C. Lee, Chattanooga, Tenn., Apr. 24, 1995.

31. Mary Ann Shubert, Selkirk, N.Y., Apr. 21, 1995; Joan Fillmore Hooker, Brooklyn, N.Y., Apr. 15, 1995; Helen Winters, Naples, Fla., Apr. 13, 1995; Margaret P. Gurler, Plymouth, Minn., June 14, 1995.

32. J. Lawrence Pool, West Cornwall, Conn., Apr. 21, 1995; A. G. Medicott, Jr., Haverhill, N.H., Apr. 22, 1995; Frances D. Rothman, Philadelphia, Penn., Apr. 17, 1995.

33. Anna T. Lehlbach, Maplewood, N.J., May 4, 1995; Marcy S. Powell, Oxford, Ohio, Apr. 18, 1995.

34. Alma R. Price, Shawnee Mission, Kan., Apr. 25, 1995.

35. Mrs. Sanford W. Weiss, New Orleans, La., Apr. 23, 1995.

come a stutter,<sup>36</sup> deflect anxiety,<sup>37</sup> or 'block out unpleasant life circumstances.'<sup>38</sup> 'As a lonely young adult in a remote mining camp . . . ,' a ninety-year-old man reported, 'I found myself recalling [certain] poems on restless nights as a sort of soothing pastime.'<sup>39</sup> The recourse to poetry under these conditions attests to the continuing life of the 'storage' or 'treasure' model of reading verse (although in these cases the value of the memorized lines lay mainly in the distraction rather than in the 'guidance' they offered). The 'treasure' metaphor, in addition to appearing in the description of the Literary Explorers Club, turned up explicitly in ten readers' letters and gave shape to many more. As one soldier, educated in the 1940s, recalled about walking guard duty years later, 'where one found oneself totally alone for two hours at a stretch, without being able to speak or read, this lode of memorized poetry was mined for pleasure and as a means to overcome boredom. I have always been grateful for this mental treasury that . . . is still a part of me.'<sup>40</sup> No less than the recitation contest, the fact that students 'bought into' the language of poetry reading as the accumulation of riches certifies the complex relationship between the school and the market.

Readers reported a second set of largely extraneous uses that revolved around family relationships. For thirty or so informants, memorization and recitation strengthened generational ties—between the schoolchild and a parent or grandparent, or between readers and their own offspring. In certain cases, particular texts acquired the status of a 'family national anthem,' notably 'Invictus' and 'If'.<sup>41</sup> Yet more often what mattered was the recognition of the bond itself. One moving letter warrants quoting in its entirety: 'In 1939, I remember coming home from the fourth

36. Mary Louise Cuneo, Bridgeport, Conn., Apr. 18, 1995.

37. Nelda Brehm, South Hadley, Mass., May 5, 1995.

38. Jane E. Lewin, Bethesda, Md., May 25, 1995.

39. Roy R. Burns, Nashville, Tenn., July 13, 1995.

40. Thomas E. Norton, Kennebunkport, Me., Oct. 14, 1995.

41. S. Barry Burros, New York, N.Y., Apr. 17, 1995; Rosaleen Hayes, Wethersfield, Conn., Apr. 21, 1995.

grade determined to memorize the poem about Columbus that begins, "Behind him lay the gray Azores . . ." As I was stumbling through the first few lines, my father began saying the poem, and said it to the end. With feeling. That glimpse of continuity and linkage between my father and me has stayed with me these fifty-six years.' In that anecdote, the text catalyzes the father's role as guide and protector; it is as if the daughter, looking up to him, has taken his hand. 'No matter where we are in the world,' another woman wrote, 'if anyone mentions a "raven" [my daughter and I] think of each other.'<sup>42</sup> Moreover, saying poetry aloud signified, enhanced, or occasionally substituted for parental love. In one touching instance, a specific poem—Whittier's 'Snowbound'—supplied a sense of 'a large loving caring family' which the respondent, a ninety-seven-year-old woman, 'missed' in her life. Again, however, the oral performance itself, rather than the text, more frequently carried the weight of the emotional bond. The son of a New York City police officer most vividly recalled 'catching a glimpse of my father and mother in the throng' as he finished reciting at a school assembly; 'the look of approval on my father's normally stern face . . .,' he explained, 'spoke a volume to me that day.' The daughter of a woman who had escaped from Russia but lived in fear of deportation dutifully complied with her mother's demands that she cultivate proper speech by saying poems; the exercise became 'a way to feel more loved.' Eventually, the daughter, who is today an actress, learned to 'please or punish' her mother by agreeing or refusing to recite. The writer John Updike, who responded to the query, cited a passage in *Enchantment* (1971), a novel by his mother, Linda Grace Hoyer, in which a young girl recites 'The Raven' and 'memory gems' to convince her aunt that she would not become 'a disgrace to our whole family.'<sup>43</sup>

42. Mary Bingham, Los Alamos, N.M., May 14, 1995; Cynthia Dogin, Armonk, N.Y., Apr. 20, 1995.

43. Anna D. Skinner, Ipswich, Mass., May 12, 1995; Stephen J. Kudless, Staten Island, N.Y., Apr. 17, 1995; Linda Polan (the actress), London, England, May 23, 1995; Linda Grace Hoyer, *Enchantment* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1971), 14.

With equal poignancy, respondents also reported rituals of home life that entangled poetry reading with family: a grandmother saying poems as she cooked or ironed, a mother doing so as she put up her daughters' hair in curlers, a parent using verse as a 'spoken lullaby,' sisters holding schoolbooks for one another as they studied their lines. Apart from recovering the rhythms of domesticity, those accounts reveal readers' stake in re-imagining themselves situated in warm, well-ordered, literate households. To this day, a woman from the Bronx wrote wistfully, 'I smile when I see a field of daffodils and their beauty—remembering my beautiful mother (then young) rehearsing it with me.' Another informant perceptively observed about her father's recitation of remembered verse as he lay dying of cancer, 'He was not a man who had a deeply good opinion of his worth, and I think it reminded him of himself as our young and loving father.'<sup>44</sup>

That example discloses as well another end poetry reading served: the formation and maintenance of identity. Here again certain texts took on special resonances. One woman's mother thought of herself as a kindred spirit of Edna St. Vincent Millay, and passed to her daughter the same value on passion and bohemian behavior. Another reader, a second-generation immigrant, found in 'Evangeline,' 'Hiawatha,' and poems of Sandburg and Frost not only a view of herself as an American, but 'an American approach to life's problems using nature as a metaphor,' and a consequent sense that one could 'gain some control over life.' When he learned 'Invictus' around 1935, a future high school teacher obtained the 'courage to face whatever has come my way these seventy-two years of my life.' The same poem helped a young girl hold her head up when her father, 'a Jew in

44. Helen C. Power, Waldoboro, Me., Apr. 24, 1995; Nancy Martin, Camas, Wash., Apr. 24, 1995; Eve Louise Furse, Stillwater, Minn., Apr. 22, 1995; Thomas E. Norton, Kennebunkport, Me., Oct. 14, 1995; Mary Fisher Andrews, North Waterford, Me., May 11, 1995; Susan Seymour Murphy, Providence, R.I., May 3, 1995; Violette Holland, Bronx, N.Y., May 1, 1995.

KKK land,' went to prison for a crime he did not commit.<sup>45</sup> Regardless of a work's content, however, several readers expressed the idea that texts were more than 'treasures' or 'possessions' (another common metaphor); these individuals remarked that they 'had become a living part of' their being. Even verse assigned as punishment became 'imprinted on the mind' and 'a part of' one reader, a biologist. An eighty-two-year-old great-granddaughter of Nathaniel Hawthorne quoted a phrase from 'Daffodils' to convey the physiological effects memorized lines seemed to stimulate: 'They flash upon that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude.'<sup>46</sup>

What is more, remembering the recitation operated (as perhaps all reminiscence does) to highlight the stability of identity over a lifetime. 'The depth of feeling in these poems,' a New Jersey woman explained, 'moved me then—at sixteen or seventeen—and still do [*sic*] at sixty-eight.' On this point, one reader's anecdote is especially powerful. When cancer drugs disoriented her father, she brought him back from dementia in part by reading Kipling: 'The rhythm and old familiar words were beloved, reassuring and confirming of some sense of continuity of self and self's concerns. . . . Memorized poetry played a part in helping his death to be a human one.' Less dramatically, schoolroom poems were 'triggers to the past' that enabled individuals to see themselves whole, while engaging the facility for long-term memory that often functions in older people better than short-term recall. 'Many a time,' a lover of Longfellow announced, 'I pick up a poetry book and enter the world of my childhood and teenage days.' Although the latter reader employed it, the word 'nostalgia' does not fully capture this mood.<sup>47</sup> Along with the institutionalization

45. Deborah Cumming, Greenwood, S.C., May 9, 1995; Carolyn Mernoff, Plainview, N.Y., May 22, 1995; Robert Stark, Cranbury, N.J., Apr. 20, 1995; Betty Hurwich Zoss, East Falmouth, Mass., July 24, 1995.

46. William R. Woods, Ben Avon, Penn., Apr. 25, 1995; Eugene W. McArdle, St. Charles, Ill., Apr. 14, 1995; Joan D. Ensor, West Redding, Conn., May 2, 1995.

47. Margery Meyer, Stamford, Conn., Apr. 20, 1995; Mary Margaret Sloan, San Francisco, Cal., Apr. 16, 1995; Isabelle N. Woodrow, Jamesburg, N.J., Apr. 26, 1995; James J. McElroy, Farmington, Mich., Apr. 24, 1995.

of verse reading in school, however, the capacity of remembered poetry to induce the re-experience of childhood arguably strengthens the association of the genre (for Americans at least) with youth—a cultural position that fiction, for example, does not share.<sup>48</sup>

In addition, as was true for the ‘poetry meets’ noted earlier, the recitation contributed to identity formation by grounding the self in wider contexts. Describing her education in Ithaca, New York, from 1933 to 1946, a writer saw performances of ‘Abou Ben Adhem,’ ‘Old Ironsides,’ and Vachel Lindsay’s ‘Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight’ as aspects of her school’s ‘great emphasis’ on ‘community-building ritual.’ Others mentioned the ‘common cultural grounding’ the curriculum supplied.<sup>49</sup> For this population of older readers, the perception that poetry reading generated community identity is intertwined with their view that, given the erosion of the recitation and of a shared literary heritage, they belong to a vanishing era. Overwhelmingly, readers displayed both distress that students today no longer memorized verse and regret about the loss of commonality. That feeling partially explains the numerous expressions of gratitude for the opportunity to answer the query: ‘I have been waiting all of my adult life,’ one respondent declared, ‘for someone to ask the question you pose.’<sup>50</sup>

Finally, as the letters about Americanization also attest, a half-

48. In *The Place of Books in the Life We Live* (1922), the Methodist minister William L. Stidger evoked the powerful, sentimental affiliation of poetry and youth, as well as the family matrix, in his description of the response of a ‘shopkeeper’ when asked how he learned to quote verse: ‘The tears came into his blue eyes. Then he glanced up with a look of light and reverence in his face and said “From my sister. She used to take me, when I was a boy about five years of age. We would go out under an apple tree and there she would teach me the great hymns and the Bible and Shakespeare. It was easy for me to memorize those great musical lines. I learned all the poetry I know before I was ten years of age. I have never forgotten what I learned from my sister under that old apple tree. She is gone now but she has enriched my life infinitely”’ (25). Stidger went on to declare that books ‘unlock Kingdoms’ in which a ‘child shall live forever and a day,’ a statement that implies one of the satisfactions readers in the sample may have derived from reminiscence.

49. Helen B. Neuhaus, Upper Montclair, N.J., Apr. 22, 1995; Hava Rogot, Bethesda, Md., Apr. 28, 1995.

50. E.g., Dora J. Schield, Reston, Va., Apr. 18, 1995; Carolyn Daniels, Rochester, N.Y., May 10, 1995.

dozen readers explicitly claimed that the recitation shaped social identity by buttressing certain values. One informant announced that in hindsight poetry reading seemed a behavior resembling tea—that is, a sign of class pretensions. Another approvingly stated that ‘Evangeline,’ ‘Snowbound,’ ‘Thanatopsis,’ and the like connected her to the ‘genteel’ town of Brookline, Massachusetts, where she grew up in one of a handful of Jewish families. Memorizing poems in school was not only a ‘civilizing and unifying experience,’ as a woman educated in Indiana from 1935 to 1948 phrased it; the task reinforced ‘the idea that poetry was something that an educated person should be familiar with and enjoy.’ Furthermore, ‘civilization’ carried gender expectations; one man confessed that he studied poems to ‘impress girls,’ while a feminist respondent averred that verse-speaking choirs taught young women ‘loyalty and obedience.’<sup>51</sup>

But reciting was a means of sociability as well as socialization. A few informants found it an ‘agony’ that isolated them from their peers; one spoke of the ‘devastated feeling of aloneness’ standing before an assembly. Yet many remarked that the practice fostered closeness among classmates who sweated through each other’s nervous delivery. (It also drew together scoffers who taunted a high school boy for his love of verse.) Poetry reading served as entertainment in the parlor and the Rotary meeting along with the school auditorium.<sup>52</sup> More important, the lines readers retained in their heads furnished the basis for social exchange long after graduation. In testimony to the national curriculum, readers described striking up friendships in retirement communities and tourist groups after impromptu unison recitations of ‘The Lay of the Last Minstrel’ or ‘Daffodils.’ It would be simplistic to interpret those episodes of mutual discovery only as moments when

51. Allyn Leidig, White Plains, N.Y., Apr. 27, 1995; Esther B. Sundel, San Diego, Cal., Apr. 17, 1995; Reva Brown, New York, N.Y., Apr. 27, 1995; Richard W. Hudgens, St. Louis, Mo., Apr. 16, 1995; Norma Marder, Champaign, Ill., Apr. 17, 1995.

52. Nancy McNulty, Leeds, Mass., Apr. 23, 1995; Rita B. Kushner, Oakdale, N.Y., Apr. 28, 1995; Olivene S. Longino, Kansas City, Mo., May 21, 1995; Earle A. Taylor, Portland, Ore., May 19, 1995; Allan Schindle, Macomb, Ill., June 27, 1995.

members of the middle class implicitly signal their shared power to one another, because it is equally possible to see the text overriding class barriers by providing a common language. Yet something of what Roger Chartier has referred to as reading that offers 'ways to signify difference' seems to be at work in such encounters, in which the 'shock of recognition' both enables former strangers to form new bonds and perforce excludes others.<sup>53</sup> In addition, schoolmates rekindled attenuated relationships by quizzing each other—with much laughter—about texts learned decades earlier. Finally, even the negative language in which readers characterized their current performances—'boring' their friends, 'indulging' themselves, committing 'recitation crimes'—suggests conventional and hence reassuring social patterns (like the banter surrounding a request to watch home movies). In all those instances, the meaning of the lines seems secondary to the meaning of the behavior.<sup>54</sup>

Given poetry's associations with intimacy, it is easy to forget its stimulus to sociability, and the way solitary reading could readily slide over into a participatory event. Yet in 1931, the educator Howard Francis Seely, depicting the typical middle-class encounter with verse, portrayed a lone reader who, moved by 'the need to share the melody of these lines with someone else,' interrupts 'whoever is in the room or house with us to read passages to him,' or, if no one is home, runs down the street to show the poem to a neighbor.<sup>55</sup> At the same time, in addition to the 'treasure,' 'possession,' and 'living part' metaphors, several letter-writers relied on the conceit that poems themselves were friends or companions. 'The poems have remained friends thru the decades,' a Texas resident wrote. 'At changing times in my life they have said

53. Grace M. Wallace, Memphis, Tenn., Apr. 19, 1995; Beverly Marzuk, New York, N.Y., June 19, 1995; Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1992), 16.

54. Florence Dober, Forest Hills, N.Y., Apr. 24, 1995; Nancy Jane B. Cheffey, Deckerville, Mich., Apr. 17, 1995; Jacob Korg, Seattle, Wash., Apr. 18, 1995.

55. Howard Francis Seely, *Enjoying Poetry in School* (Richmond: Johnson Publishing Co., 1931), 8-10.

different things to me, and similarly I to them. Now I'm retired and we don't need to say much to each other; but I remember them lovingly, and the parts of our relationship which I can verbalize and also the parts which I cannot.' That language coexisted with a deeper response: the acknowledgment that poetry mitigated a perception of cosmic isolation. Here the philosophies integral to particular works did come into play. 'The poems I keep with me,' a woman who finished high school in 1941 confided, 'all seem to encapsulate certain moods, or seasons. I do say them often to myself—they give me great comfort or an awareness of the universal human condition (in other words, 'I'm not alone').' Even as children, some readers derived that conclusion: 'I was able to identify with the poet and know I was not alone or unique in my feelings,' wrote one man. 'Not a bad thing for a twelve-year-old boy to know.'<sup>56</sup>

The universal perspective readers acquired sustained the affiliation between poetry recitation and religion. So did the frequent references to the 'consolation' and 'peace' memorization later provided. Religious resonances, of course, characterize all of the uses of poetry thus far catalogued: the practice's capacity to offer psychic relief, signify family relationships, and foster personal and social identity mirrors functions of faith. A former parochial school student in fact labelled poetry recitation an extension of the catechism.<sup>57</sup> To move from predominantly extraneous to primarily integral applications of texts, however, numerous readers implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—endowed particular works with the properties of scripture or prayer. A mother noted that Herbert's 'Virtue' had lessened her grief at the loss of a child. A Baltimore psychotherapist still reads aloud almost daily a copy of

56. Isabel Bliss, Chelsea, Mich., Apr. 26, 1995; M. Maxine Garner, Liberty, N.C., Apr. 16, 1995; Helen H. Baker, West Milford, N.J., May 15, 1995; Henry Exall, Jr., Dallas, Tex., Apr. 18, 1995; Joan Flint, Tulsa, Okla., May 16, 1995; John J. Goodwin, Bedford, N.Y., Apr. 19, 1995.

57. John A. Buckland, Old Greenwich, Conn., Apr. 17, 1995; Anna Netta Frick, State College, Penn., May 1, 1995; Ronald C. Binks, San Antonio, Tex., Apr. 25, 1995; David Brown Parrish, Gallatin, Tenn., June 5, 1995; Mary Grasso, Garden City, N.Y., Apr. 18, 1995.

'If' on his wall; memorized in seventh grade, the poem, he explained, 'affords me the solitude, comfort, and strength to live more fully, richly and meaningfully.' A Methodist woman who grew up in rural Georgia learned Longfellow's 'Psalm of Life' in fourth grade; it 'put to rest the nagging questions of what life was about.' Poetry, she added, supplied the 'simplicity, the certainty, the lyricism' which 'answered some need for guidance, for assurance, for relief from existential angst.' Another reader described her first exposure to Wordsworth's 'The World is Too Much With Us' in terms akin to religious conversion: her seventh-grade English teacher wrote the entire sonnet on the blackboard and 'at that moment my world changed. . . . All that I knew on that day was that I felt my mind awaken.' The eighty-eight-year-old daughter of Italian immigrants to New York astutely perceived the Christian ideals within her elementary school assignments that were studded with Longfellow: 'Without being taught religion to children of different faiths, we all imbibed the religious teachings.' In one instance, belief took a different turn: a reader traced his fascination with Buddhism and the contemplative life to the influence of 'Daffodils.'<sup>58</sup>

Other informants affirmed that certain poems instilled, rather than merely reinforced, moral character (thus fulfilling the hopes of nineteenth-century pedagogues). In the 1930s an Illinois father repeatedly quoted Edwin Markham's 'Outwitted' to remind his son 'of ways to foster tolerance.' Leigh Hunt's much-taught 'Abou ben Adhem' developed in many readers a similar mistrust of zealotry. A clergyman reported developing sermons based on verse that 'direct[s] thoughts toward peace and justice'; his wife, a Unitarian minister, claimed that, unlike traditional homilies, 'the poetry is remembered.' Overtly religious applications tended to cut across canon boundaries, resulting in another example of eclecticism. For instance, a Baptist minister chronicled his re-

58. Helen Edersheim, New York, N.Y., May 28, 1995; Eric K. Gratz, Baltimore, Md., Apr. 18, 1995; Joan C. Browning, Ronceverte, W. Va., Apr. 19, 1995; Edith Spilka, Westport, Conn., Apr. 19, 1995; Gilda Sferra, Long Beach, N.Y., Apr. 17, 1995; Gary Martin, Milford, Penn., May 5, 1995.

liance on British and American works ranging from Kipling's conventionally pious—and conventionally rhythmic—'Recessional' to Robinson Jeffers's disillusioned, unrhymed 'Shine, Perishing Republic.'<sup>59</sup>

By way of conclusion, two additional practices that relied on the meaning and composition of particular poems deserve attention. First, certain poetry functioned for several readers as filters for experience. If virtually anything comprehensible that scanned well could serve as a 'mantra' for the dentist's chair, here the sense of the text is most closely integrated with its use. Many respondents wrote that three works—'Daffodils,' Helen Hunt Jackson's 'October's Bright Blue Weather,' and Lowell's lines beginning 'What is so rare as a day in June?'—automatically came to mind as, year after year, they noticed signs of seasonal change. The recurrent images in those poems furnished an additional source of continuity over a lifetime, while positioning readers to focus on flowers or sky as if seeing through the poet's eyes. Similarly, two individuals described taking the Staten Island ferry in order to reproduce Edna St. Vincent Millay's exuberance at being 'very young and very merry' on the same boat. Although one might conclude that a poem could dull sensation by blunting the reader's unmediated perception, respondents said the opposite: these conjunctions between print and experience made them feel, as one phrased it, 'more aware, more alive, more appreciative.'<sup>60</sup>

Second, a dozen readers explicitly mentioned the function of rhythm, sound, and imagery as a source of delight. For some, the gratification arose from appreciating the 'precision' of well-crafted lines; others drew analogies to the aesthetic satisfactions of listening to music. 'I still enjoy the measured rhythm of it,' wrote a man who learned 'Paul Revere's Ride' as a sixth grader in

59. L. Barry Barrington, Arlington Heights, Ill., Apr. 17, 1995; Dorine Braunschweiger, Teaneck, N.J., Apr. 20, 1995; Herman Weingord, Flushing, N.Y., Apr. 22, 1995; Robert S. Moore, Chicago, Ill., Apr. 25, 1995; Viola Moore, Chicago, Ill., Apr. 20, 1995; John David Burton, Red Bank, N.J., June 6, 1995.

60. Robert Finley, New York, N.Y., Apr. 18, 1995; Elizabeth Bosland, Glen Rock, N.Y., June 10, 1995; Mary T. Lovett, Liberty, N.C., Apr. 19, 1995.

1948 or 1949.<sup>61</sup> Some readers, perhaps influenced by progressive pedagogy, counterposed enjoyment of the 'tune' of verse to engagement with meaning. 'I must have had some dim idea,' explained one who completed eighth grade in 1933, 'that poems do not need to mean anything, that poetry was . . . a kind of incantation.' Yet others declared, 'I loved the sounds and the ideas.' The singer Julius LaRosa reported a 'never-ending memory' linking 'Invictus' with a damaged World War II aircraft carrier; from his teachers, he learned to relish both 'the beauty and power of language.'<sup>62</sup>

The words 'enjoy' and 'loved' signal a further lesson that virtually all of these autobiographies of poetry reading entail. In addition to the curricular, psychological, domestic, social, and religious dimensions of the recitation the responses illuminate, they prompt attention to the nature of reading for pleasure. The fullest recent study of that subject, Victor Nell's *Lost in a Book* (1988), emphasizes fiction and identifies the attainment of an intensified state of consciousness as the key element in 'ludic reading.' Yet the respondents teach us that pleasure could inhere as well in the laughter prompted by sharing memories; in the comfort of enclosure in the shelter of the family; in the competence and mastery a filled 'treasure chest' afforded; in the association between poetry and identity, or poetry and experience; and in the attainment of peace. Such gratification could be avowedly sensual—both a man and a woman respondent traced their sexual awakening to reading 'The Highwayman'—or intellectual, bound up with a 'love of learning.'<sup>63</sup>

As Lionel Trilling noted, poets themselves have implied distinctions among kinds of pleasure—between Wordsworthian joy and Keatsian eroticism. But Keats, Trilling argued, also insisted

61. E.g., Peter K. Oppenheim, San Francisco, Cal., May 2, 1995; Jonathan V. Norman III, Louisville, Ky., Apr. 16, 1995.

62. Ruth Limmer, New York, N.Y., Apr. 18, 1995; Martin Goldstein, Teaneck, N.J., June 20, 1995; Dorothy Helfeld, San Francisco, Cal., May 13, 1995; Patricia M. Fort, DeLand, Fla., Apr. 17, 1995; Julius LaRosa, suburban New York City, Apr. 18, 1995.

63. Samuel Varco, Jr., Ocean Ridge, Fla., Apr. 28, 1995; Rhoda M. Lippel, New York, N.Y., Apr. 18, 1995; Alfred M. Lutvak, Bayside, N.Y., Apr. 20, 1995; Candide Slinko, Sandy Hook, Conn., Apr. 19, 1995.

that poetry be 'gentle, soothing, cheerful, healthful, serene, smooth, regal' and uplifting—a doctrine that 'for the modern sensibility' (in Trilling's view) was 'inadmissible and even repulsive.'<sup>64</sup> These readers, many of whom characterize the pleasurable consequences of verse in precisely Keats's terms, contradict Trilling's sense of what 'we' as a culture take for granted: that order, hope, and good have no place in the contemporary imagination. As such, their letters—like the texts on which they reported—collectively underscore the importance of recognizing that modernism did not obliterate competing literary forms and outlooks. It may be, of course, that, as these elderly correspondents die, not only fading schoolroom verse but also assumptions about the possibility of 'peace and bliss'<sup>65</sup> will perish with them, and that Trilling's modernist 'we' will become total. All the more valuable then, the record of longlived texts, persistent ideals, multiple functions, and diverse pleasures their accounts of poetry reading supply.

64. Lionel Trilling, 'The Fate of Pleasure,' in *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (New York: Viking, 1965), 68.

65. Trilling, 79.

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