

A POEM IS GOOD COMPANY

By Gabrielle Griswold©

Iambs? Trochees? Dactyls? How many American school kids today know what those words mean? For that matter, how many knew sixty-odd years ago?

I did, because I had the good fortune to attend what must have been then, and surely still is today, one of the best schools in any country: the Lycée Français de New York. When I entered the Lycée in September 1938 at the age of twelve, I also had one of the best English teachers I would ever have: Miss Gladys Peacock, a real Englishwoman from England and a fabulous educator, who taught us all sorts of marvelous things that young students don't always get to learn.

Poetry was one of them, and she not only taught us about rhythm and meter and verse, she also had us try them out in short poems which we composed ourselves. I still remember two lines of doggerel which I wrote as a homework assignment to illustrate iambs. It went: "Oh, what a jolly life to lead, / Remarked a daisy to a weed." What I wrote to illustrate trochees and dactyls, I no longer recall. But Miss Peacock laid the foundation for a lifelong love of poetry, requiring us also to memorize whole poems by heart, which we then had to stand up in class and recite. And with iambs, trochees and dactyls under our belts, we readily understood what was meant by iambic pentameter when shortly thereafter we began the study of Shakespeare. Before I was sixteen, we had read and studied no fewer than *ten* of Shakespeare's plays, and memorized entire passages from those as well.

At the Lycée, the only classes taught in English were English Language/Literature and American History. All other subjects were taught in French by French teachers from French textbooks. In French Language/Literature, we were also required to memorize whole poems, from La Fontaine's fables all the way to Villon Victor Hugo, and Verlaine. As with the English poems we memorized, some of those lines remain embedded in my memory still.

It seems to me a great loss that poetry is not taught in American elementary, middle and high schools today—if it ever was (for that matter, is it even still taught in England and France?)—and that the memorization of poetry is not a requirement in any curriculum I've heard of. Not only does that discipline serve to focus and

train the memory, it also fosters an appreciation of the beauty and rhythm of language, and enriches students with a wealth of immortal words which resonate for a lifetime.

It has done that for me, and I am truly grateful that the experience of poetry was an essential part of my early education. *The Oxford Book of English* Verse was one of our essential textbooks, which I leafed through pleasurably for hours in own free time for the intimations it offered me of love, death, mortality, patriotism, philosophy, nature, fantasy, history, spirituality, and so much more. To this day I still retain my Lycée copy, and often refer back to some of the poems I relished then.

Had I not thoroughly internalized the message of 'Invictus' at the receptive age of twelve, would I have known so surely in later life how greatly the power of my own mind could arm me against adversity? If I had not read and loved O'Shaughnessy's 'Ode,' would I have understood so well the need for dreams? Although Kipling wrote his famous 'If' for young boys, were not some of the principles he advocated equally valid for everyone? And although I already loved flowers, it would enhance my enjoyment forever afterwards to remember, and mentally recite, Wordsworth's poem whenever I came across "a crowd, a host of lovely daffodils."

It can be argued, I suppose, that like music and art, poetry is not an 'essential' in our time. But, like music and art, it adds untold depth and meaning and joy to our lives.

Without the beauty and nobility of those many immortal words learned at a young age and imprinted permanently on my mind where I could and can summon them up at will, I feel absolutely certain that my imaginative life throughout the years would have been infinitely the poorer.