

ANGLICA

An International Journal of English Studies

25/1 2016

EDITOR

prof. dr hab. Grażyna Bystydzińska [g.bystydzienska@uw.edu.pl]

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

dr hab. Marzena Sokołowska-Paryż [m.a.sokolowska-paryz@uw.edu.pl]

dr Anna Wojtyś [a.wojtys@uw.edu.pl]

ASSISTANT EDITORS

dr Katarzyna Kociołek [kkociolek@uw.edu.pl]

dr Magdalena Kizeweter [m.kizeweter@uw.edu.pl]

ADVISORY BOARD

Michael Bilynsky, University of Lviv
Andrzej Bogusławski, University of Warsaw
Mirosława Buchholtz, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń
Xavier Dekeyser, University of Antwerp / KU Leuven
Bernhard Diensberg, University of Bonn
Edwin Duncan, Towson University, Towson, MD
Jacek Fabiszak, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań
Jacek Fisiak, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań
Elzbieta Foeller-Pituch, Northwestern University, Evanston-Chicago
Piotr Gąsiorowski, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań
Keith Hanley, Lancaster University
Christopher Knight, University of Montana, Missoula, MT
Marcin Krygier, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań
Krystyna Kujawińska-Courtney, University of Łódź
Zbigniew Mazur, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin
Rafał Molencki, University of Silesia, Sosnowiec
John G. Newman, University of Texas at Brownsville
Michał Jan Rozbicki, St. Louis University
Jerzy Rubach, University of Iowa, Iowa City
Piotr Ruskiewicz, Pedagogical University, Cracow
Hans Sauer, University of Munich
Merja Stenroos, University of Stavanger
Krystyna Stamirowska, Jagiellonian University, Cracow
Jeremy Tambling, University of Manchester
Peter de Voogd, University of Utrecht
Anna Walczuk, Jagiellonian University, Cracow
Jean Ward, University of Gdańsk
Jerzy Welna, University of Warsaw

GUEST REVIEWERS

Dorota Babilas, University of Warsaw
Teresa Bela, Jagiellonian University, Cracow
Maria Błaszkievicz, University of Warsaw
Anna Branach-Kallas, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń
Teresa Bruś, University of Wrocław, Poland
Francesca de Lucia, independent scholar
Ilona Dobosiewicz, Opole University
Andrew Gross, University of Göttingen
Paweł Jędrzejko, University of Silesia, Sosnowiec
Aniela Korzeniowska, University of Warsaw
Andrzej Kowalczyk, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin
Barbara Kowalik, University of Warsaw
Ewa Luczak, University of Warsaw
David Malcolm, University of Gdańsk
Dominika Oramus, University of Warsaw
Marek Paryż, University of Warsaw
Anna Pochmara, University of Warsaw
Paweł Rutkowski, University of Warsaw
Agnieszka Setecka, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań
Andrzej Wicher, University of Łódź
Joanna Ziarkowska, University of Warsaw



UNIVERSITY
OF WARSAW

Daniel Xerri
University of Malta

‘Living in a house without mirrors’: Poetry’s Cachet and Student Engagement

Abstract

This article examines the contentious proposition that poetry has for the past few decades been experiencing a crisis, especially when it comes to student engagement. By means of the results of a study conducted in an English as a second language context, it explores teachers’ and students’ beliefs, attitudes and practices in relation to poetry. This article shows that the very discourse used to talk about poetry is a direct reflection of how much cachet it is ascribed in the classroom. It questions whether this inflation of cachet is responsible for the fact that poetry is not perceived as a genre that teachers and students opt to read for personal pleasure.

Students’ engagement with a literary text seems to be one of the most desirable objectives of literature teaching. In fact, it is claimed that “The key to active, involved reading of literature is engagement with a text” (Beach, Appleman, Hynds, and Wilhelm 170). However, a number of writers on literary education have deemed young people’s engagement with literature in general and poetry in particular to be in trouble. Despite the fact that this situation has been a cause for concern for a number of decades, it currently seems to be even more pronounced and is considered to be symptomatic of the downtrend that is being experienced by the humanities in education as well as in contemporary society as a whole. This is especially pertinent for the small Mediterranean island of Malta, where the present study is set. It is also relevant to other contexts where teachers’ pedagogy might not make use of active approaches to poems nor expose students to engaging forms of poetry like spoken word poetry and multimodal poetry (Xerri, “Poetry Teaching”).

By reviewing the literature in relation to crisis discourse and the concomitant value of poetry in education, the groundwork is laid for an investigation of what teachers and students think about poetry’s status in the educational system. These views were gathered by means of research whose main purpose was that of shedding light on teachers’ and students’ beliefs, attitudes and practices in relation to poetry and the study of poetry at Advanced Level in a post-16 college in Malta. On the basis of the findings that emerged from this study, this article questions whether

the very discourse used to discuss poetry's status is helping to undermine students' engagement with poems as texts that may also be read outside the classroom.

1. Crisis Discourse

The death of literature was announced in the 1960s and it was associated with a number of factors, including the influence of television and the rise of new schools of criticism such as post-structuralism and deconstruction. Kernan explains that "What has passed, or is passing" is the literature "that flourished in capitalistic society in the high age of print, between the mid-eighteenth century and the mid-twentieth" (5–6). The rise of digital and audiovisual media in particular has been proclaimed as hastening the death of the printed book. This seems to be leading to a situation in which "the very continuation of literary culture is, in effect, put in play by a scholarly and educational turn away from a literary corpus strongly identified with the printed book" (Paulson ix). Even though books for the time being are not in risk of utter extinction "their prestige and status, their role as models of learning and knowledge transmission, and even their centrality to literary culture are not what they used to be" (Paulson 9). These views might sound sensational and anachronistic but they are indicative of nostalgia for a literary golden age in which books were synonymous with a form of permanence that is well nigh impossible to achieve in the digital era.

This perceived crisis has reverberations in the classroom environment as well, in which "Reading and writing have to share space and time [...] with ever more new activities" and the reading of books is "less and less reinforced or supported – whether in school or out of it – by the communications environments in which students actually live their lives" (Paulson 9). Once again those teachers and students who share this view are probably expressing a yearning for a time in which technology did not play an increasingly fundamental role in defining the way people engage with literary texts both inside and outside the classroom.

The literary crisis seems to be compounded by the fact that some form of dilution is threatening the kind of critical engagement that is required by literature. Seyhan, speaking about the aftermath of 9/11, says that even though "Verse can be a powerful shield against adversity [...] the search for meaning and consolation in literature at a time of crisis can only be temporary in a society where people have practically forgotten how to read" (510–511). For Bloom in the contemporary world of distractions "Reading falls apart, and much of the self scatters with it" and "All this is past lamenting, and will not be remedied by any vows or programs" (23). In Manguel's opinion the crisis is exacerbated by the fact that "instead of promoting books of breadth and depth, for the most part the publishing industry of our time creates one-dimensional objects, books that are surface only and that don't allow readers the possibility of exploration" (130). Such ideas imply that readers are los-

ing the ability to engage in the kind of literary reading associated with a past era in which there were fewer distractions and in which literature had pride of place in culture.

Those who declaim the existence of a crisis feel that literature is being denigrated by contemporary society and for this reason “People die miserably every day for lack of what is found in despised poems” (Edmundson 1). Some teachers manifest “an extreme timidity” and “find it embarrassing to talk about poetry as something that can redeem a life, or make it worth living,” while there are those who admire literary works as aesthetic artefacts completely removed from “common experience” (Edmundson 2). Somewhat in relation to this, Showalter says that “Even talking about our profession with any hint of idealism can bring down the sneers of the sophisticated, while it’s often hard to know exactly what kind and degree of cynicism to adopt” (4). What might be being implied by these ideas is that those teachers who feel reluctant to adopt a crisis discourse and its attendant championing of literature’s redeeming value might be implicitly responsible for the literary crisis.

In fact, teachers (and students) are seen as being partly to blame for the crisis because some of them “denounce literature’s privileged role in education as an irrelevant or elitist relic” best replaced with “more popular, democratically shared forms of cultural production” (Paulson 2). This leads to a situation in which the humanities are viewed as being impractical. Seyhan in fact affirms that “in an age marked by profound scepticism about the value of the humanities and by the rapid corporatization of universities [...] our efforts to promote literature as a legitimate field of inquiry ring inevitably apologetic” (511). The apparent need to justify the utility of the humanities is seen as indicative of how malignant the crisis has actually become.

Despite the doom-laden discourse of those who diagnose the literary crisis, there are those who are much more cautious when it comes to discussing literature’s status in contemporary culture. When talking about the future of the humanities, Culler warns against the tendency to engage in “crisis narratives” that all seem to despair at the decline of “a canon of great cultural monuments [...] and [the] ignorance and moral imbecility of students” (42). He feels that rather than trying to reverse the clock to an illusionary moment in time in which there was not yet a crisis, teachers should embrace the idea that “the humanities ought to teach [...] diversity” (Culler 48). Moreover teachers should not feel that “the principal justification for work in the humanities must be the contribution they make to the formation of what we used to call the ‘well-rounded’ student” (Culler 53). Those accusing the humanities of being recondite for not being utilitarian can best be answered by means of the argument that “Thought can flourish under utilitarian pressures, but it also needs discursive spaces where it can pursue questions as far as possible without knowing what general use or relevance the answers might prove to have” (Culler 54). Even though “The death of literature looks like the twilight

of the gods to conservatives or the fall of the Bastille of high culture to radicals,” Kernan argues that “we are watching the complex transformations of a social institution in a time of radical political, technological, and social change” (10). It is the embrace of such an institutional metamorphosis that is most often missing from the discourse of those who sensationalise the crisis in literary studies.

2. The Poetry Crisis

The crisis in literary studies is considered to be especially acute when one considers poetry in particular. Just like the crisis in literary studies in general, the crisis in poetry has been developing for a number of decades. Reeves, for example, believes that poetry is meant to provide the reader with pleasure and he affirms that “No nation which claims to give its citizens a full cultural education can neglect its poetry” (93). He bemoans the fact that “by the time children have left school, ninety-nine per cent of them have no use for it” and for this he blames the notion that “poetry is not felt to be a vital part of the adult life of a modern community” (Reeves 88). In agreement with this, Muir affirms that the general public “is quite unworried, does not know what it has lost, and goes its way” (2). This is partly to do with “our contemporary notion of poetry as a rarefied and special and often difficult thing” (Muir 94). Rather pessimistically, Holbrook proclaims that “poetry has lost confidence in itself, and that this is part of a widespread failure of human creativity” (11). Given students’ “severe difficulties in reading poetry [...] of being able to believe in poetry, to love poetry, to be stirred by it” (243), Holbrook’s injunction is that this belief needs to be regained at all costs. In full agreement with this, Thompson asserts that notwithstanding the fact that for much of history poetry was a crucial aspect of human communities, its role in contemporary society has gradually become less important and its utility has diminished. He laments the fact that “Hostility to poetry and the arts generally still persists” and believes that the audience for poetry has become “a small minority of the population” and that this “can never be a satisfactory aim or recipe” (Thompson 191–193). The issue of poetry’s significance “is an urgent question at a difficult time for anyone concerned with creativity in education” (Sedgwick 95) and is closely bound to the importance of language for humanity. In the times before the crisis, poetry was valued for “its capacity not only to open other worlds, but also to explain and illuminate this one” (Spiro 5). However, currently a more practical view of language predominates and thus “the business-driven world of corporate meanings and conventional formulae is more valued than the life of the imagination” (Spiro 5). Parini is aware that “Poetry doesn’t matter to most people” and this is because “There is little time for concentration, or a space wherein the still, small voice of poetry can be heard” (ix). These views pinpoint the root of the problem as lying within society’s utilitarian preoccupations, which cause poetry to be sidelined as being somewhat *recherché*.

Poetry is seen as occupying “a marginal place” both “in the world which the children we teach will live in as adults” as well as in “the actual cultural lives” of teachers of English (Parry 112). Kermode refers to Valery’s idea that among those for whom poetry is an intrinsic part of their job and hence whose responsibility it is “to cultivate a taste for it in others, there are many who lack any appetite for it, or any understanding of the need for it” (26–27). This implies that some teachers are not interested in reading poetry and cannot help affecting students’ own enjoyment of poetry. In fact, teachers are seen as being responsible for aggravating the crisis. McIrvine, for example, goes so far as to claim that “Poetry has become irrelevant” partly because “Those who do teach poetry mostly offer up canned responses to the staid standbys from literature survey textbooks” (89). It is argued that in order to effectively motivate students to read for pleasure teachers need to be “themselves readers, teaching *by example* the attitudes and behaviors of a reader” (Day and Bamford 140). In class, teachers need to position themselves as readers (Commeyras, Bisplinghoff, and Olson) and to “model the behaviours of an enthusiastic reader” (Hedgcock and Ferris 227). It is clear that teachers are seen as being instrumental in determining the level of students’ engagement with poetry.

However, not everyone agrees that poetry is in trouble. Hall, for example, feels that those who proclaim the death of poetry tend to exaggerate and to ignore the fact that “there are many poets, many readings –and there is an audience” (26). He states that the audience for poetry has actually grown and that the concept that poetry is a dying genre is a lie that by means of constant repetition is adduced to be a fact by those “who enjoy viewing our culture with alarm” (Hall 20). The former poet laureate Andrew Motion is not alarmed at poetry’s status in contemporary culture and feels that “The audience for poetry is much larger than it’s usually held to be.” Even though he admits that poetry might not be for everyone and that “many schoolchildren, especially boys, find poetry difficult,” Motion still thinks that “with some imaginative thinking, about how to shape the national curriculum for instance, a far larger number of people will be able to take poetry into their lives.” Once again teachers and the educational system in which they operate are seen to play a crucial role in influencing young people’s attitude to poetry.

3. Poetry’s Cachet

A number of distinguished poets and literary critics conceive of poetry (and literature) as having a transformative and illuminating potential. The kind of discourse employed to talk about poetry invariably ends up amplifying poetry’s cachet. By vesting poetry with some kind of transcendental significance that elevates it above all other genres there is a risk that young people might not consider it relevant to their everyday lives, viewing it solely as the preserve of academic study. For Mallarmé poetry’s task is to “endow / with a sense more pure the words of the tribe” (89).

Stevens argues that poetry seems “to have something to do with our self-preservation” and it “helps us to live our lives” (36). Thompson concurs with this and says that poetry “provides the reader with a means of discovering truths about himself and about human experience” (198). Heaney views “poetry as divination, poetry as revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself; poems as elements of continuity” (41). According to him “Poetry of any power is always deeper than its declared meaning. The secret between the words, the binding element, is often a psychic force that is elusive, archaic and only half-apprehended by maker and audience” (Heaney 186). In an essay on Keats’s conception of poetry, Hughes shows that he shares the same ideas: “true poetry [...] is a healing substance – the vital energy of it is a healing energy, as if it were produced, in a natural and spontaneous way, by the psychological component of the auto-immune system, the body’s self-repair system” (249). Such claims for poetry’s potential imbue it with a substantial amount of cachet and help to elevate it onto a pedestal that is seemingly removed from young people’s ordinary everyday experiences.

Literature and poetry in particular are considered capable of not only transforming the individual reader but also of reforming society. Eco claims that literature possesses a “true educational function” (13) that influences the kind of person one turns out to be. He states that most of the “wretches” who sometimes commit heinous crimes end up this way because “they are excluded from the universe of literature and from those places where, through education and discussion, they might be reached by a glimmer from the world of values that stems from and sends us back again to books” (Eco 4). In tune with William Carlos Williams’s ideas, Edmundson affirms that reading literature can change a person’s life: “there may be no medium that can help us learn to live our lives as well as poetry, and literature overall, can” (1). He argues that “Poetry – literature in general – is the major cultural source of vital options for those who find that their lives fall short of their highest hopes”; it acts as “our best goad toward new beginnings, our best chance for what we might call secular rebirth” (Edmundson 2–3). He is convinced of “the fact...that in literature there abide major hopes for human renovation” (Edmundson 3). As teachers of literature “what we need is for people to be open to changing into their own highest mode of being” (Edmundson 86). In a similar vein Manguel posits the question of whether “is it possible for stories to change us and the world we live in?” (3). He feels that literature can sometimes “heal us, illuminate us, and show us the way” (Manguel 9). In his opinion “The language of poetry and stories...groups us under a common and fluid humanity while granting us, at the same time, self-revelatory identities” (Manguel 26). For Parini “Poetry matters because it serves up the substance of our lives, and becomes more than a mere articulation of experience” (181). These ideas betray the seemingly common belief that poetry has a transformative function that serves both the reader and society.

However, not everyone agrees that reading poetry can have such a transformative effect on the individual and society. Kermode, for example, rejects the idea that

teachers of literature can make people good. He feels that “reading, as we ought to teach it, can make not a good person, but a subtle, questioning one, always with the possibility of corruption yet richer and more enriching” (Kermode 57). Whilst agreeing that literature may allow us “to strengthen the self, and to learn its authentic interests,” Bloom disagrees with the idea that literature possesses a broader transformative potential. In his opinion we read “not because we can “improve anyone else’s life by reading better or more deeply” (Bloom 22). He considers “The pleasures of reading” to be “selfish rather than social” and “remain[s] sceptical of the traditional social hope that care for others may be stimulated by the growth of the individual imagination” (Bloom 22). He is clearly “wary of any arguments whatsoever that connect the pleasures of solitary reading to the public good” (Bloom 22). This scepticism does not detract from poetry’s ability to provide the reader with cognitive and emotive pleasure. It merely acknowledges that to overburden poetry with the kind of expectations traditionally associated with religious arcana is potentially alienating for some readers.

4. Poetry and Personal Growth

One of the chief reasons for poetry’s cachet seems to be the notion that poetry possesses some kind of transformative power that allows the individual to achieve personal growth. The personal growth model of literature teaching was the one most often alluded to by the teachers and students forming part of this study and some of its principles seem to influence their attitude towards poetry.

The personal growth model is constructed on the premise that the reading of literature can serve as an avenue for personal enrichment. In Hourd’s opinion, for example, the primary aim of a literature lesson is “to provide a means towards a fuller development of personality – a means, again, of growth” (13). A 1968 bulletin published by the Scottish Education Department echoes this idea and states that “the value of literature for mental growth cannot be ignored” (7–8). In a report on the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar, Dixon shows how teachers and students adopting the personal growth model can “work together to keep language alive and in so doing [...] enrich and diversify personal growth” (13). By using what they encounter in literature students use language to accommodate the world as they experience it and thus achieve personal growth. During a literature lesson students find themselves “taking on new roles, facing new situations – coming to terms in different ways with new elements of oneself and new levels of human experience” (Dixon 31). It is for some of these reasons that this pedagogical model is considered to be highly student-centred.

Those teachers who justify the teaching of literature by means of the individual development it generates feel that their adoption of the personal growth model “involve[s] students as active learners” and helps them “achieve a sense of self-

identity” as well as “clarify their values” (Rodrigues and Badaczewski 3). Brumfit considers it a “tragedy” that “literature remains inaccessible to so many people” and this is because “there is no more easily available source for personal growth than serious literature” (124). He argues that the “only honest justification for any kind of [literature] teaching” is that as teachers we wish to communicate our own personal need to partake of the experience of reading an “imaginative literature for the light it sheds on [us] and [our] position as human beings” (Brumfit 122). Cutajar and Briffa take these ideas further and state that literature as a subject “illuminates different areas of human life so that the learner might deepen his/her views on the quality of living. It contributes to the business of living and may alter a person’s outlook of the world” (20). By studying literature “The learner is educated in modes of thought that equip him/her with a cognitive disposition that may be transferred to other areas of human behaviour and may eventually transform his/her view of life in general” (Cutajar and Briffa 20). These arguments emphasise the singular significance of literature as a valuable source of personal enrichment for students. However, the rhetoric used by those describing this kind of literature-based enrichment might also run the risk of distancing students from literary texts due to the perceived profundity attached to something so overwhelmingly laden with cachet.

Supposedly, the main advantages of the personal growth model are that it “demystifies literature” and that students are involved holistically; hence the whole process is “potentially highly motivating” (Lazar 25). Nonetheless, the downside to it is that if the transformative and illuminating potential of literature is heavily underscored the cachet of literary texts is overinflated and this might lead students to feel alienated from something that is perhaps a bit too abstruse for it to form part of their everyday lives. In fact, Gribble maintains that literary studies should not set “the *general* emotional development and psychic health of the individual [as] [...] a primary objective” but they should be “concerned to develop the adequacy and appropriateness of students’ emotional responses to literary works [and] [...] this necessarily entails the development of the adequacy and appropriateness of their perceptions of literary works” (108). By overly accentuating the transformative potential of literature teachers might unwittingly lead students to view literature with too much awe and this might cause any plans for literature-based personal growth to rebound adversely.

5. The Study

The study took place at the largest post-16 college in Malta, a country that due to its colonial heritage recognises English as one of two official languages. The majority of the population is bilingual, learning Maltese and English from an early age but speaking the latter as a second language. The institution where the study was conducted acts as a preparatory school for students wishing to sit for

Matriculation examinations with the intention of enrolling at university. Students who choose to study Advanced Level English follow a two-year course leading to a nine-hour examination consisting of a number of language, linguistics and literature components. Two of these components focus on poetry: a question on a set text (e.g. Wilfred Owen's war poems) and an unseen poem. Preparation for the first component is provided by means of lectures while training for the unseen poem component is held during literary criticism seminars.

The study employed a mixed methods approach involving the following instruments: a survey completed by 376 students aged 16 to 18; semi-structured interviews with 15 students; and semi-structured interviews with eight poetry teachers. Every interview was conducted in a one-to-one manner and the two interview guides were designed in such a way that there was a high level of consistency in the kind of questions asked to both sets of interviewees. These questions probed their beliefs, attitudes and practices in relation to poetry and poetry pedagogy. The teachers all held Masters degrees or PhDs in English and only one of them had less than five years' teaching experience. All the students had at least one year of post-16 schooling.

6. Reasons for Studying Poetry

The teachers and students interviewed for the purposes of this study conceived of poetry as a form of enrichment that allowed the reader to achieve personal growth. They seemed to consider it to be a highly significant genre that needed to continue being studied otherwise students would be short-changed by the educational system.

All the teachers claimed that poetry played an important part in the Advanced Level English course and most of them expressed the opinion that "it's enriching" (Teacher A, henceforth TA) in some way or other. Despite the fact that it could be termed "not essential" (TB) or "useless" (TC), poetry was still a necessary part of the syllabus because "it develops a certain refinement in our appreciation of life" (TB). According to one teacher poetry "does make you wonder at being alive and I think our students need a kind of reconnection to the sheer unpredictability of being alive" (TC). Moreover, poetry seemed to develop one's understanding in terms of "allow[ing] the individual to see the world differently, to see the world from the point of view of others, to explore aspects of imagination which otherwise wouldn't be explored" (TD). Poetry allowed people to "connect with certain parts in ourselves which might not come to the fore otherwise" (TG). These teachers seemed to share the belief that poetry was of benefit to students because it possessed a transformative and illuminating potential.

The majority of interviewed students concurred with their teachers' views in relation to poetry's enriching potential. For most of them studying poetry was

a means of developing one's understanding of life and human emotions, with four of them indicating that "by studying poetry we are also studying life in a way" (Student B, henceforth SB). Poetry gave students an "insight on their own lives, it helps them understand certain things" (SJ) and this happened because "poetry is something which is really insightful and really deep" (SE). The fact that these students held these beliefs in common with their teachers leads one to contemplate whether they were bequeathed to students during their poetry lessons.

All the teachers seemed to concur that students should continue studying poetry in this day and age because "it's a form of enrichment" (TH). If the educational system had to prevent them from studying poetry "it would be robbing our students of a very important experience whether or not they follow it up in the future" (TE). All the teachers agreed with the idea that students got a lot out of studying poetry, "both in terms of language and also in terms of discovering new things about themselves and the world around them" (TD). Poetry "aids in critical thinking and analysing what people write, what people say" (TB). For one teacher "in an age of prose, with all that involves, keeping poetry alive or allowing poetry to keep us alive is a necessity" (TC). A colleague of his agreed with this and said that "if you don't have poetry it's like living in a house without mirrors [...] poetry is essentially aimed at knowing yourself" (TA). For this teacher poetry was "a civilising process [...] and if we stop teaching poetry we are saying that we have stopped civilisation" (TA). The figurative idea of "living in a house without mirrors" captured how significant poetry was held to be as a means of "civilising" the student, but what this teacher probably failed to notice was that this cachet was firmly bound to poetry's role as a school subject.

Almost 85% of surveyed students declared that poetry was important. For more than half of the interviewed students poetry needed to be studied because by means of it "a lot of people can understand emotions [...] it makes you think about such things" (SC). Poetry allowed students to "analyse things more, see things that other people can't see" (SD). According to one student "you'd be surprised by how much poetry can help someone" (SJ). These views seemed to corroborate the idea that students colluded with their teachers in thinking that poetry was a crucial part of the curriculum because of the presumed personal growth it led to. The similarity between the rhetoric employed by teachers and students seemed to indicate that they shared a set of entrenched beliefs about poetry's transformative value. Elsewhere (Xerri, "Colluding"), I show how these shared beliefs lead teachers and students to adopt the same approach to poetry, seeing it as something to be critically analysed rather than read for pleasure. In fact, paradoxically enough, despite highlighting how much cachet it possessed for them, very few teachers and students mentioned that poetry was something they enjoyed reading.

7. Reading Poetry

Notwithstanding the fact that both teachers and students seemed to consider poetry to be a highly significant genre in terms of its potential for personal growth, when asked about their poetry reading habits it transpired that only a small number of them actually read poetry for personal pleasure. This seemed to be at variance with the prestige that they accorded to poetry and was probably a result of the notion that poetry was considered to be an academic genre rather than something teachers and students read for pleasure.

7.1 Teachers' Reading of Poetry

Only three teachers mentioned that they enjoyed reading "some poetry just for pleasure" (TB), the others indicating that they normally opted for prose. The teachers mentioned a total of 21 favourite poets, however, the list was unduly lengthened by the nine poets mentioned by one particular teacher (TE), who was himself a published poet. If the list of mostly contemporary poets mentioned by TE were not to be taken into account then it would be clear that the majority of teachers preferred strictly canonical poets. Philip Larkin was mentioned by half the teachers and this was probably due to the fact that up to a few years ago *The Whitsun Weddings* was on the A Level English syllabus. The only other two poets who were mentioned more than once were Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney. These findings are in line with those of a major UK study (Cremin, Bearne, Mottram, and Goodwin), which found that teachers' knowledge of poets and their reading of poetry for pleasure are highly restricted. It is this dismal state of affairs that children's poet John Rice (qtd. in Xerri, "Poetry on the Subway") encounters whenever he visits schools, leading him to claim that "it's a very restricted canon of work that teachers have read" (114). Teachers' lack of reading of contemporary poetry makes it difficult for them to model the behavior of enthusiastic readers of poetry written by 21st century poets.

Ironically, the same teacher who used the simile of "living in a house without mirrors" to describe the absence of poetry in people's lives also claimed that he did not read a lot of poetry for pleasure "because things here can get so intense that you don't want to sort of imprison yourself in this academic world" (TA). A colleague of his seemed to concur with this idea and said that he preferred prose "probably because poetry requires a more intense and a more engaged reading" (TD). In fact, five of the teachers indicated that if they had to choose between reading and listening to poetry they would prefer the former because when they read it they could do so at their "own pace" (TB) and "concentrate more" (TC). According to one teacher, "poetry does demand repeated raids on the inarticulate and I think reading for that is necessary" (TC). This shows that for most of these

teachers poetry was associated with academic study and required a critical kind of engagement which they did not usually opt for when reading purely for pleasure. Most probably this kind of attitude towards poetry was driven in part by their belief that poetry was the repository of a form of transformative wisdom that could only be tapped by an analytical approach.

According to those teachers who mostly read poetry for work purposes, teaching gave them the opportunity to read a lot of poetry. As one teacher put it, “professionally I can’t avoid it” (TA). The latter also mentioned that he enjoyed “reading it aloud especially to an audience [...] we’re very fortunate here that we have been granted a captive audience [...] these poor devils can’t do anything about it” (TA). Despite the fact that these teachers mostly read poetry because of their job they still enjoyed it. However, two of them did confess that their awareness of examination realities did sometimes mar the experience. They ended up “look[ing] at the poem in more pedagogical terms” (TE) and “when you become over technical about something and you have to reduce it to a certain level [...] it’s like you lose the joy of it” (TG). This kind of analytical approach to poetry seemed to undermine some teachers’ motivation to read it for pleasure: “the problem is that since I’ve been teaching and doing poetry mostly for crit I’ve become too analytical I find and whenever I read a poem I don’t just read it for pleasure” (TF). The word “analyse” was used by almost all the teachers and this seemed to indicate that poetry for them entailed an analytical kind of approach that hindered them from seeing it as a genre that they could read solely for pleasure. The very cachet they ascribed to poetry made it seem abstruse and probably led them to see it as incapable of any other kind of approach.

7.2 Students’ Reading of Poetry

As shown by Figure 1 more than 80% of the 376 surveyed students admitted that they either did not read any poetry for pleasure or did so only on rare occasions. Just like their teachers, the 15 interviewed students seemed to share a preference for prose, with only four of them mentioning that they read any poetry for pleasure. One student pointed out that she “prefer[red] prose because poems it’s more fun to discuss than to read” (SA). To explain why they did not read any poetry the students claimed that “it just isn’t in me” (SG), that they “don’t know [...] where to look for good poetry” (SH), and that they “find it boring [...] I just don’t enjoy reading it [...] it frustrates me” (SM). These sentiments seemed to be instigated by the shared perception that poetry was “difficult” and that it required them to “analyse” it in a particularly methodical manner. Just like their teachers, students attributed a lot of cachet to poetry by seeing it as capable of transformation but in the process this served to make poetry seem difficult and thus only accessible via the analytical approach practised in the classroom.

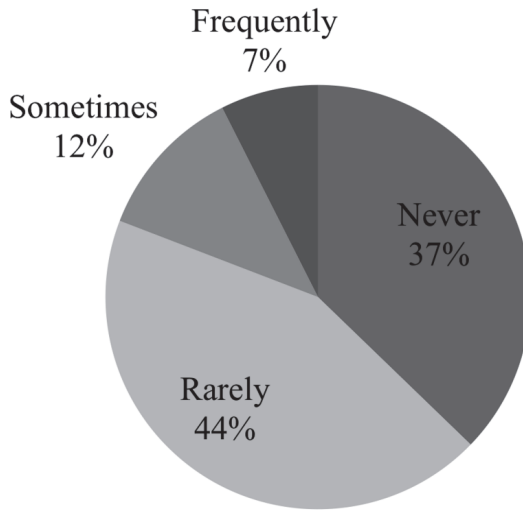


Figure 1. How often do you read poetry for pleasure?

In common with their teachers, the interviewed students' taste in poetry was restricted to a few canonical poets. They mentioned a total of nine favourite poets and all of these poets were ones the students had read during literary criticism seminars or else ones they had encountered in secondary school. Shakespeare was mentioned six times while Ted Hughes and Wilfred Owen were mentioned three times. The fact that the range of mentioned poets was so narrow seemed to indicate that poetry was a genre they encountered solely within the confines of the classroom and under the guidance of their teachers, who ended up adopting the role of gatekeepers to a poem's meaning (Xerri, "Colluding").

Some of the students who only read poetry for study purposes claimed that "I have to study poetry but I don't enjoy reading it" (SM), one of them admitting that "if it wasn't for school I wouldn't read too much poetry [...] because I think I've always thought of it as being academic, sort of it's work" (SF). However, this student did confess that "maybe if I look at published poetry from another perspective and not as something that has to do with school maybe I would read more" (SF). Another student took a somewhat opposite perspective when she said that "I'm also finding poems that I really like through studying so then I look them up and look up [the poet's] works" (SC). This link between studying and enjoying poetry was also made by a student who admitted not to reading a lot of poetry but finding it "interesting" because one got "to analyse the thoughts of [the] poet" (SB). As in the case of the interviewed teachers, the students seemed to associate poetry with academic study and rarely perceived it as a genre that could also be read for personal pleasure. Most probably this was partly due to the fact that teachers and

students vested poetry with a transformative power that required an analytical approach for it to be unleashed.

The majority of students taking part in this study seemed to consider their poetry lessons as the sole opportunity for them of reading poetry. Only 35% of surveyed students agreed that if poetry were not part of the syllabus they would still read it and less than half the interviewed students declared that their poetry lessons had encouraged them to read more poetry for pleasure. One student stated that “if I hadn’t attended these lessons I wouldn’t have looked up poetry for personal pleasure” (SB) and this seemed symptomatic of the fact that unfortunately for most students poetry was only engaged with at school.

Nearly 61% of surveyed students claimed that they would not continue reading poetry once they finished their studies. Apart from two students whose poetry reading habits were not affected because “I’ve always done it so it hasn’t really had an impact on me” (SJ), most of the interviewed students asserted that their lessons had not encouraged them to read poetry for pleasure. One student claimed that this had not happened “because I’m not interested in it” while another student said, “I think I only read the poems I need to study. I don’t like reading poetry for pleasure. I don’t really understand poetry” (SN). For other students it was either because they preferred reading prose or else “because most of us just feel fed up with the number of poems we have to study” (SH). The constant link that students seemed to make between poetry and study was probably what stopped most of them from conceiving of it as something that they might enjoy reading in a non-academic context. As shown by Cremin, this negative attitude towards poetry can partly be changed if teachers position themselves as “readers who teach and teachers who read poetry” (224). If teachers are seen to value poetry as a genre that they enjoy reading for pleasure rather than as something cryptic and which necessarily demands an analytical approach for its transformative and illuminating potential to be harnessed, then students are much more likely to mirror that attitude.

Conclusion

Crisis discourse most often pinpoints a variety of reasons for which poetry is seemingly in decline, some of them found within the educational system while others outside it. Nonetheless, the idea that the lofty status of this genre could in a way be responsible for undermining students’ engagement with poetry in post-16 education has not been given sufficient consideration. The stress laid on its transformative potential inflates its cachet and helps cultivate the belief that poetry is a “difficult” genre that requires an analytical approach in order for it to be properly understood. By subscribing to this view, teachers ironically fail to position themselves as readers of poetry for pleasure. This probably plays a part

in dampening students’ enthusiasm for the reading of poetry beyond the confines of the classroom. Teachers’ and students’ complicity in amplifying poetry’s cachet helps to place it on top of a pedestal that is just too high for it to be accessible in a non-academic context.

References

- Beach, R., D. Appleman, S. Hynds, and J. Wilhelm. 2006. *Teaching Literature to Adolescents*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Bloom, H. 2001. *How to Read and Why*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Brumfit, C. 1985. *Language and Literature Teaching: From Practice to Principle*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Commeyras, M., B. S. Bisplinghoff, and J. Olson. 2003. *Teachers as Readers*. Newark, NJ: International Reading Association.
- Cremin, T. 2010. “Exploring Poetry Teachers: Teachers Who Read and Readers Who Teach Poetry.” *Poetry and Childhood*. Ed. M. Styles, L. Joy, and D. Whitley. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books. 219–226.
- Cremin, T., E. Bearn, M. Mottram, and P. Goodwin. 2009. “Teachers as Readers in the 21st Century.” *Acts of Reading*. Ed. M. Styles and E. Arizpe. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books. 201–218.
- Culler, J. 1988. *Framing the Sign: Criticism and its Institutions*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Cutajar, M., and C. Briffa. 2004. “Assessing the Learning of Literature.” Paper presented at the Third Conference of the Association of the Commonwealth Examination and Accreditation Bodies, Fiji, March.
- Day, R. R., and J. Bamford. 2002. “Top Ten Principles for Teaching Extensive Reading.” *Reading in a Foreign Language* 14: 136–141.
- Dixon, J. 1969. *Growth through English* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Eco, U. 2004. *On Literature*. Trans. M. McLaughlin. New York, NY: Harcourt.
- Edmundson, M. 2004. *Why Read?* New York, NY: Bloomsbury.
- Gribble, J. 1983. *Literary Education: A Reevaluation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hall, D. 1994. *Death to the Death of Poetry: Essays, Reviews, Notes, Interviews*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Heaney, S. 1980. *Preoccupations*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Hedgcock, J. S., and D. R. Ferris. 2009. *Teaching Readers of English: Students, Texts, and Contexts*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Holbrook, D. 1977. *Lost Bearings in English Poetry*. London: Vision Press.
- Hourd, M. J. 1949. *The Education of the Poetic Spirit: A Study in Children’s Expression in the English Lesson*. London: Heinemann.

- Hughes, T. 1994. *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*. Ed. W. Scammell. London: Faber and Faber.
- Kermode, F. 1989. *An Appetite for Poetry: Essays in Literary Interpretation*. London: Collins.
- Kernan, A. 1990. *The Death of Literature*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lazar, G. 1993. *Literature and Language Teaching: A Guide for Teachers and Trainers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mallarmé, S. 1957. *Poems*. Trans. C. F. MacIntyre,. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Manguel, A. 2008. *The City of Words*. London: Continuum.
- McIrvin, M. 2000. "Why Contemporary Poetry is Not Taught in the Academy." *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 54: 89–99.
- Motion, A. 2009. "Yet Once More, O Ye Laurels." *The Guardian*. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/mar/21/andrew-motion-poet-laureate>.
- Muir, E. 1962. *The Estate of Poetry*. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Parini, J. 2008. *Why Poetry Matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Parry, C. 1972. *English through Drama: A Way of Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Paulson, W. 2001. *Literary Culture in a World Transformed: A Future for the Humanities*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Reeves, J. 1958. *Teaching Poetry: Poetry in Class Five to Fifteen*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Rodrigues, R. J., and D. Badaczewski. 1978. *A Guidebook for Teaching Literature*. Harlow: Allyn & Bacon.
- Scottish Education Department. 1968. *The Teaching of Literature*. Edinburgh: HMSO.
- Sedgwick, F. 2003. *Teaching Poetry*. London: Continuum.
- Seyhan, A. 2002. "Why Major in Literature – What do We Tell Our Students?" *PMLA* 117: 510–512.
- Showalter, E. 2003. *Teaching Literature*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- Spiro, J. 2004. *Creative Poetry Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stevens, W. 1960. *The Necessary Angel*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Thompson, D. 1978. *The Uses of Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Xerri, D. 2012. "Poetry on the Subway: An Interview with Children's Poet John Rice." *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship* 18: 105–115.
- . 2012. "Poetry Teaching and Multimodality: Theory into Practice." *Creative Education* 3: 507–512.
- . 2013. "Colluding in the 'Torture' of Poetry: Shared Beliefs and Assessment." *English in Education* 47: 134–146.