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Teachers' Beliefs and Literature Teaching: The Case of Poetry

1 Introduction

Literature teaching is the subject of a lot of current research and the debate includes a focus on issues of value and methodology, as shown by other papers in this volume. For example, Elisabeth Bracker analyses the interplay between language learning and engagement with literature in class while Christine Gardemann assesses the actual use of literary texts in English language classrooms. This paper adds to the debate by evaluating the beliefs of poetry teachers working in a post-16 institution in Malta.

In light of the idea that “Poetry doesn’t matter to most people” (Parini: ix), it is important to investigate how teachers seek to help students engage with poetry in contemporary classrooms. Some consider education as being partly to blame for the loss in cachet that poetry is supposedly experiencing (Edmundson) while others “denounce literature’s privileged role in education as an irrelevant or elitist relic” (Paulson: 2). However, probably more than any other literary genre, poetry still has a substantial amount of cachet and this is partly due to teachers’ perceptions of it as something difficult but at the same time laden with the potential to enrich and transform the reader. These beliefs influence the way teachers approach poetry in class and thus determine the mediation between students and poetry. Given the importance of having poetry teachers who are themselves readers, this paper analyses teachers’ reading of poetry and then explores their beliefs in relation to its status as a school subject. Due to the fact that students’ experience of poetry is largely dependent on how they study it in class, this paper also examines teachers’ beliefs about the approach they consider most suitable for teaching poetry.

2 Teachers and Poetry

Teachers' relationship with poetry has an effect on how students engage with it. The next few sections review the literature on the effects of teachers positioning themselves as poetry readers, teachers ascribing poetry with too much cachet, and teachers adopting the stance of gatekeepers to meaning.

2.1 Teachers as Poetry Readers

A number of studies indicate that one of the best ways of encouraging students to engage in extensive reading is through teachers positioning themselves as readers. For Day and Bamford "Keeping in mind that they are role models may change teachers' perceptions of the classroom and their role as teachers" (*Extensive Reading*: 136). When teachers position themselves as readers they engage in classroom practices that enable them to "guide students and participate with them as members of a reading community" (Day and Bamford, *Extensive Reading*: 47). Such practices boost students' motivation to engage in extensive reading and allow students to consider reading as a pleasurable activity because of their perception of teachers as role models. According to Day and Bamford "Effective extensive reading teachers are themselves readers, teaching *by example* the attitudes and behaviors of a reader" ("Top Ten Principles": 140). They are willing to "talk with students about their reading lives" (Commeyras, Bisplinghoff, and Olson: 164) and consider it important to inspire a love of reading by acting as readers who teach.

The problem of unenthusiastic readers is of concern to most teachers, but what they sometimes fail to acknowledge is that they themselves play a crucial part in helping to solve this problem. For Hedgcock and Ferris "An obvious but often neglected way to do this is to model the behaviors of an enthusiastic reader" (227). The problem is compounded by the fact that in some cases teachers themselves are not enthusiastic readers, especially of poetry. A UK study by Cremin et al. found that 73.2 % of teachers had read for pleasure during the last month (204). However, 40 % of these teachers prefer popular fiction and less than 2 % opt for poetry (Cremin et al.: 204–205). The same study found that 58 % of teachers could name only one or two poets, with 22 % being unable to name any poets at all (Cremin et al.: 207). There was also a scant knowledge of women poets and multicultural poetry and Cremin et al. conclude that when teachers do engage with poetry in the classroom they "tend to select poetry for its capacity to teach particular language features rather than enjoying it for its own sake" (208). The results of this study are confirmed by the views of the poet

John Rice (as cited in Xerri, "Poetry on the Subway"), who is disappointed with teachers' knowledge and reading of poetry whenever he visits schools:

I don't think they do read it as much as we suppose they do because sometimes if I mention a poet's name to a teacher they don't know who that person is and if I mention certain poems or certain anthologies it's a very restricted canon of work that teachers have read and it's usually poetry from very deep in the past. (114)

The importance of teachers' reading of poetry as a means of addressing the problem of unenthusiastic young readers is underscored by the results of a study that aimed to develop 43 teachers' stance as readers who teach (Cremin). The results show that "teachers' increased knowledge, pleasure and use of poetry widened the children's repertoires and experience of poetry, positively influencing their understanding and attitudes" (Cremin: 223). This seems to suggest that the way teachers position themselves in the poetry lesson is fundamental, especially in so far as enabling students to adopt a positive attitude towards poetry and to read it for pleasure and not just for academic purposes.

2.2 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. 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). These 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, “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” (22), 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.

Teachers play a crucial role in inspiring young people to enjoy poetry and the way they approach poems in class can help either stimulate a lifelong passion for the genre or an equally vehement rejection of it. Some of the challenges that teachers face when teaching poetry are to some extent related to the fact that poetry seems to possess an inordinate amount of cachet, ascribed to it in part by the notion of its difficulty. Certain definitions of poetry's nature underscore its "superiority over other forms of expression and [have] perhaps done the genre no favours by placing it on so high a pedestal" (Dymoke, *Teaching English*: 76). The idea that poetry is a difficult medium can "lead potential readers [...] to reject its advances" (Dymoke, *Teaching English*: 78). In fact, the older students get, the more likely they are to see poetry as an elite form of art (Booktrust). According to Motion (as cited in Gibbons) in order to "demystify poetry" in students' eyes, teachers need to be encouraged "to get over the mental block that poetry was difficult to teach." Demystifying poetry is crucial if students are to see poetry as something accessible and enjoyable, something they can read on their own without the teacher acting as a gatekeeper to meaning.

2.3 Teachers as Gatekeepers

The stance adopted by teachers during poetry lessons can help perpetuate the myth that a poem is an enigmatic text that can only be made accessible by means of the teacher's elucidation of its meaning. By adopting "the position of supreme arbiter" (Stratta, Dixon, and Wilkinson 41), a teacher will not help students develop their own personal response to a text but will merely compel them to accept the opinion of an expert reader. This only serves to make students "passive" and leads them to perceive reading as if it were "a kind of detective work, a cracking of codes and solving of mysteries, having little or no relevance to life as they live it beyond school" (Stratta, Dixon, and Wilkinson: 42). In turn, a mechanical analysis of poetry becomes the only appropriate way of reading a poem, something that should ideally be counterbalanced with activities that "guide students into the study of poems without forcing them to accept the teacher's interpretations" (Elkins: 190). Such activities would hopefully tap students' creativity and transform them from passive into active readers of poetry. One example of such an activity is to encourage students to interpret poems in a multimodal manner (Xerri, "Poetry Teaching and Multimodality").

The way poetry is approached in the classroom also affects students' reading of a poem:

If classroom teaching has encouraged a view of poetry as something with a meaning stubbornly hidden in the text and revealed only to the fortunate few, many readers are likely to do no more than engage in making probing guesses, hoping that somehow the poem's meaning will occur to them. (Dias and Hayhoe 35)

Some teachers attempt to give students the impression that the analytical approach used to unearth a poem's meaning is objective. Even when students come to realise that this is not so they still feel "inhibited about trusting their own response" and embark on the unseen component "in fear and trembling" (Scott: 33). Such an approach obviously "implies that poetry is something locked away like the best china, and that a special key needs to be fetched before you can get at it" (Strauss vii). Consequently the misconception arises that since the teacher is the one holding the key students should rely on their teacher to be given access to a poem's mysteries.

Benton reports that "far from facilitating pupils' learning and engagement with poetry some teachers felt constrained to adopt strategies which they felt actively hindered it" (521). These strategies are mainly those associated with a highly analytical approach to the teaching of poetry that assigns teachers the privileged role of explaining to their students the hidden meaning of a poem. Dymoke criticises "The notion of poetry as a puzzle" which she finds to be "a common perception among students (and their teachers) who engage in a hunt for the missing clue which will help them solve the poem" (*Drafting and Assessing*: 3). Burdan agrees with this and claims that "For many students, literary analysis is primarily a means by which their teachers demarcate the gap between the students' naive or inept readings of literature and their own, more sophisticated ones" (23). Rather than confidently exploring the poem students seek to guess what the teacher already knows is hidden in the text.

The belief that reading poetry involves an interaction with the poem during which the reader discovers meaning is responsible for such a lack of confidence on the students' part. According to Burdan "This misunderstanding of reading is further complicated by a view of the literature classroom as a territory too perilous for uninitiated and inexpert readers to explore" (23). Hence students adopt the guise of observers rather than participants and read in order to find out what the poet is saying or what they think their teacher understands the poet is saying (Burdan). This seems to have a long lasting effect. Pasquin describes the surprise of a group of student teachers when she asked them to avoid analysing a poem. She explains that this reaction was due to the fact that "they had struggled with the meaning of poetry all through their high school years and now a poem presented itself as a problem to be solved, in a fashion that must please the teacher and the examiner" (Pasquin: 256). By adopting the stance of gatekeepers to poetry some teachers help to consolidate students' belief that a poem will

remain inscrutable as long as a teacher is not present to help them unravel its meaning by means of a highly analytical approach.

3 Why Teach Poetry?

Two of the most influential approaches to literature teaching are those focusing on the linguistic benefits that are accrued by students and the personal growth that ensues when they engage with literature. The language-based and personal growth models seem to shape teachers' pedagogy and provide them with a rationale for the teaching of poetry.

3.1 Language-based Model

A language-based model operates on the methodological principle that literary studies combine language and literature elements by encouraging students to focus on the language of a literary text. A close analysis of the language of the literary text allows students to "make meaningful interpretations or informed evaluations of it" as well as "increase their general awareness and understanding of English" (Lazar: 23). The students' knowledge of the language will allow them to "make aesthetic judgements of the text" (Lazar: 23). Besides its literary merit, the text to be studied in class is selected for the stylistic characteristics of the language used. The main advantage of the language-based model is that students use the literary text in order to improve their English proficiency. The students are armed with the necessary analytic tools to help them come up with their own interpretations and they "develop a response to literature through examining the linguistic evidence in the text" (Lazar 25). Literary texts are valued because they are rich in styles, registers and topics and they stimulate classroom discussion by being open to a variety of interpretations.

The act of combining literature and language learning provides students with a range of texts to choose from and exposure to a wide assortment of English varieties. Literature provides students with "language in action, a living context and focal point for them in their own efforts to communicate" (Hill: 108). In dealing with the text the students will find the stimulus to engage in language production. According to Brumfit the value of combining literature and language teaching is that of providing students with a varied and fertile source of reading material, however, "A true literature syllabus will not be simply the use of literary texts for advanced language purposes, but an attempt to develop or extend literary competence" (106). According to Culler without literary competence students would be unable to make sense of a literary text given that their

linguistic knowledge would only enable them to understand the meaning of the phrases and sentences but not to “convert [these] linguistic sequences into literary structures and meanings” (114).

Some proponents of the language-based model are geared towards enabling their students to make use of the tools they need to evaluate texts critically. Hence students are trained in the use of those techniques that allow them to study a literary text in a more direct fashion. According to Lazar, stylistic analysis “involves the close study of the linguistic features of a text in order to arrive at an understanding of how the meanings of the text are transmitted” (27). Traditional practical criticism has failed to present students with a set of strategies by means of which they can form critical judgements but has on the contrary relied on the students’ intuition. This “seems to imply that understanding or appreciating literature is the result of a kind of mystic revelation, which is not available to everyone” (Lazar: 31). Obviously this has had the effect of making students feel “bored, mystified or demotivated” (Lazar: 31). Stylistics seeks to foster an aesthetic appreciation of the text by bridging its linguistic features and the intuitions that students form about its meaning. It investigates the way meanings are communicated by a text by means of a method that “uses the apparatus of linguistic description” (Leech and Short: 74). Linguistic concepts allow students to be more precise in their analysis of a text and in explaining how certain effects and language features function in the text.

Stylistic analysis is important because it helps in “making sense of foregrounded aspects of language” (Leech: 225). Given that the signs and clues of literature are linguistic in nature, Widdowson is of the opinion that “the sensitivity must initially be a sensitivity to language” (74). The gains derived by means of the literary studies propounded by Leavis “can only be realised if the student develops an awareness of the way language is used in literary discourse for the conveying of unique messages” (Widdowson 76). The prime advantage of this approach lies in the fact that students will be able to acquaint themselves with the way the language shaping literary messages is different from that shaping other instances of communication. This is especially significant for foreign and second language learners of English because thanks to this approach “a student can become more aware of, and take steps to solve, his or her problems as a non-native reader” (Parkinson and Reid Thomas: 33).

An analysis of the language allows students to understand the literary text in a more comprehensive manner. Alderson and Short point out that stylistics allows the reader to arrive at an interpretation “by describing the linguistic devices an author has used, and the effects produced by such devices” (72). Carter affirms that stylistic analysis is marked by the “*intersection of the language of a text with the elements which constitute the literariness of that text*” (162). Short contends that stylistics provides students with a “descriptive analytical vocabulary” that

allows them to understand a text more insightfully and elucidate their “intuitive responses” to it in a way that is no longer solely “general and impressionistic” (1). Verdonk reports that by using stylistics his students “had learnt to look at poetry with different eyes: they had learnt to ask questions about the language of a poem that they might otherwise have ignored” (263). Linguistic analysis is particularly suited to poetry because in a poem “aesthetic effect cannot be separated from the creative manipulation of the linguistic code” (Leech and Short: 2). Stylistics seems to heighten students’ understanding of the creative use of language in poetry.

Despite its merits, the risks posed by a too stringent application of the principles of the language-based model are that all opportunities for personal interpretation are stifled and the whole exercise becomes “very mechanical and demotivating” (Lazar 25). In fact, Carter and Long warn against the misuse of the language-based model and advise teachers that it should first and foremost “service literary goals” or else “the essential *pleasure* in reading literature can easily be lost in the more instrumental manipulation of a text” (8). If the “special enjoyment and fulfilment” bestowed by literature is disregarded “then much of the real purpose in teaching and reading literature is lost too” (Carter and Long: 8). These warnings are particularly significant given the risk that the analysis of literary texts might lead to teacher-centred lessons.

3.2 Personal Growth Model

One of the chief reasons for poetry’s cachet seems to be the notion that it 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 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.

The personal growth model is characterised by activities that capitalise on students' contributions to the lesson. Hence choosing poems that are relevant to the students' lives and interests is highly important as is the act of encouraging students to find points of intersection between the text's content and their ideas and experiences. In order to claim ownership of the poem students need to be able to free-associate around the central themes explored in it and link these to their own thoughts. Students might also benefit from empathising with the persona in a poem by imaginatively stepping into the text and adopting the persona's voice. This would be especially enriching if the poem engages students with multicultural experiences (Xerri, "Multicultural Poetry"). Responding to a poem by engaging in creative writing is of course a means by which students are empowered to use the text as a platform for personal expression. For students who are not very familiar with creative writing, shared writing of a published poem might be the best way of taking on a writer's guise (Xerri, "Shared Writing").

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.

4 The Study

A total of eight poetry teachers took part in this study. They all held Masters degrees or PhDs in English and only one of them had less than five years’ teaching experience. The study took place at the largest post-16 college in Malta where students enrol on a two-year A Level English course leading to a nine-hour examination. The latter includes two poetry components: 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.

Every teacher was observed conducting one 60-minute literary criticism poetry seminar and the data was collected by means of an events checklist and note taking. The checklist incorporated a time sampling approach and it was used in order to record a list of pre-determined lesson events in every one-minute interval. Event frequencies were subsequently calculated in terms of percentages of the total lesson time.

After each in-class observation session the teacher in question took part in a semi-structured interview that was conducted in a one-to-one manner. All the interviewees were asked to explain what they thought of poetry as part of the A Level course. They were also asked to read a copy of Billy Collins’s (1988) “Introduction to Poetry”¹ and to think about whether it describes their experience during a poetry lesson. This poem was chosen because of its potential as stimulus material.

1 A copy of this poem can be found at: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/176056>.

4.1 Definitions of Poetry

The majority of teachers were somewhat taken aback when asked what they understand by the term “poetry” and this could be because for them “you cannot really define it a priori because once you do that you take away that which is singular in poetry and therefore that which goes beyond categorisation [...] that which goes beyond the conceptual” (Teacher D, henceforth TD). However, all the teachers seemed to agree that poetry is a special use of language that is characterised by conciseness and is a form of artistic expression. For some teachers “poetry doesn’t have to be a form of defamiliarisation though it often is” (TD). One teacher explained that “nothing is more ridiculous and banal and everyday than a pumpkin but poetry is the kind of fairy godmother that transforms it into the golden carriage” (TA).

As a “distillation of language”, poetry is able to “express something that [...] touches you so deeply and it’s almost impossible to put into words” (TG). Poetry is “an outburst of feeling” that requires “inspiration” (TF) and by means of it readers “achieve deep insights both cognitive and emotional” (TC). This implies that as “a special use of words” poetry is “a means of contacting the deepest layers of our minds and hearts and this is why it still has its magic” (TC). For one particular teacher, poetry “allows you to be part creator” (TH). In a way “poetry more than any other form of literature gives you this freedom of being creative yourself because you are rewriting” a poem when “analysing” (TH) it. Just as poetry is special so is the poet, one teacher saying that poets are “more clever [...] more perspicacious” (TH) while another teacher confessing that she “believe[s] that some poets are a bit crazy” (TF). A few teachers defined poetry in more prosaic terms. For the only published poet in the group of interviewees, “a poem is a unit of time”; in his opinion before exploring content it helps students to think of poetry “in terms of time and adjusting that time to the space of words and rhythms and syllables and feet” (TE). Despite acknowledging the singularity of poetry in terms of its use of language, these teachers seem to value poetry primarily because of its ineffable qualities. Their view of poetry is imbued with reverence and it is clear that for them poetry possesses a substantial amount of cachet.

4.2 Experiencing Poetry

Despite putting it on a pedestal, only three teachers mentioned that they enjoy reading “some poetry just for pleasure” (TB); the others indicated that they usually opt for prose. One teacher claimed that he does 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, saying that he prefers prose "probably because poetry requires a more intense and a more engaged reading" (TD). In fact, most 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 can 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). These teachers seem to consider the act of reading poetry as requiring a special kind of intellectual engagement that hampers them from enjoying it solely for pleasure.

According to those teachers who mostly read poetry for work purposes, teaching gives 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 enjoys "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 the teachers mostly read poetry because of their job they still enjoy it. However, some teachers did indicate that their awareness of examination realities does sometimes mar the experience. They end 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 seems 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). For these teachers poetry seems to be a genre associated with their academic career and which does not easily lend itself to recreational reading.

The teachers mentioned a total of 21 favourite poets. However, the list is inflated by the nine poets mentioned by one particular teacher (TE). If the list of mostly contemporary poets mentioned by TE is not taken into account then it is clear that the majority of teachers prefer strictly canonical poets. Philip Larkin was mentioned by half the teachers and this is 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.

Table 1: Teachers' Favourite Poets

All teachers (excluding TE)	TE
Philip Larkin	Paul Muldoon
Ted Hughes	Ted Hughes
Seamus Heaney	Seamus Heaney
T.S. Eliot	Don Patterson
William Shakespeare	Elizabeth Bishop
Robert Browning	Sylvia Plath
Alfred Tennyson	Langston Hughes
Paul Celan	George Szirtes
William Wordsworth	Derek Walcott
Khalil Gibran	
Emily Bronte	
Emily Dickinson	
Jorge Luis Borges	

Despite the fact that all the teachers prefer reading poetry, some of them do consider listening to and writing poems to be important. Half the teachers mentioned that they enjoy listening to poetry, with one teacher saying that it has a “spellbinding effect” (TC). Another teacher claimed that, as a creative writer, listening to poetry plays a crucial role for him because it “is both a creative exercise and a receptive exercise” (TE). Five teachers claimed that they have experience of writing poetry, however, only one of them described himself as a creative writer (TE). The others indicated that they either did it in the past or else they only do it occasionally. One of these teachers said that writing poetry “gives you a tremendous thrill while you’re doing it [...] it’s a need [...] it’s the overflowing of the cup” (TA). The fact that these teachers give primacy to the act of reading poems rather than writing or listening to them seems to confirm the idea that in their eyes poetry is an academic genre that requires the kind of analytic approach they espouse in their lessons.

4.3 Poetry as a Course Component

The poetry components seem to be two of the most favourite for teachers. All the teachers mentioned that they prefer teaching literature and nearly all of them indicated that poetry is one of their most favourite subjects. According to one teacher, poets “give you more amplitude” because “you put them within a context so that the students can understand” (TA). Three teachers are of the idea that they enjoy teaching poetry “because it is more demanding” (TC) on them and their students; doing poetry “challenges the mind” (TF). These teachers acknowledged that sometimes students find poetry difficult but in their opinion knowing how to analyse poetry is “a skill that they need for life” (TF). They

associated poetry lessons with a discovery process: "it's more interesting to communicate what you have discovered and trying to urge the students to discover more in the poem" (TB). One teacher claimed that even though she enjoys teaching poetry "I wouldn't just like to do poetry [...] I need a break from poetry sometimes" (TH). It seems as if poetry's prestige plays an important role in these teachers' enjoyment of poetry lessons. This prestige is partly connected to their perception of poetry as a challenging genre that demands a set of analytical skills in order for meaning to be extracted. In their privileged role as expert readers of poetry these teachers act as gatekeepers to meaning for students.

4.4 Reasons for Teaching Poetry

All the teachers indicated that poetry plays an important part in the A Level English course and most of them are of the opinion that "it's enriching" (TA) in some way or other. Despite the fact that from a utilitarian perspective it can be termed "not essential" (TB) or "useless" (TC), poetry is 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). Another teacher explained that there are also more tangible benefits to studying poetry: "if I had to justify poetry's place in the A Level I would say that in order for a language to be engaged with at a certain level it has to be understood also when it is being used creatively" (TD). A colleague of his agreed with this and said, "we teach poetry to make students aware of the beauty of the language and also to make students aware of how language can be utilised" (TG). Moreover, poetry seems 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 allows people to "connect with certain parts in ourselves which might not come to the fore otherwise" (TG). For these teachers poetry needs to be studied not only because it is an exceptionally creative use of language but also because it possesses a transformative and illuminating potential.

All the teachers concurred 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 get 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 is “a civilising process [...] and if we stop teaching poetry we are saying that we have stopped civilisation” (TA). These transformative and illuminating attributes of poetry inflate it with cachet and help cultivate the perception that poetry is a difficult genre that can only be engaged with in an analytic manner.

4.5 Poetry Lessons

When teaching poetry almost all the interviewed teachers claimed to focus on a poem’s use of language and its potential for personal enrichment. Most of the teachers seem to believe that content and language are equally important and one teacher explained that “what we do at A Level when it comes to poetry is mostly based on the New Critics, the idea that [...] form is content and content is form. So we never just focus on what the poem is about or how it is written but we try to bring them together” (TD).

A poem’s use of language is considered to be highly significant, with nearly all of the teachers echoing the idea that “poetry is a special use of words, it’s a unique use of words” (TC). One teacher explained that “poetry is playful and careful attention to its language could give them so much [...] without this attention to language we would be short-changing students in a way” (TA). Most of these teachers mentioned that they “start by making them aware of the power of words” because “if they do not develop an affinity to words it is useless” (TG). In fact, during the observed lessons the language-based model of teaching seemed to be one of the most popular, with most of the teachers adopting an almost stylistic approach to the analysis of the text. One teacher informed his class, “Poetry is language. I never considered myself a teacher of poetry but a teacher of language” (TA). Despite giving the language of poetry a lot of importance in their lessons, the observed teachers mostly relied on explaining a poem’s use of language rather than encouraging students’ initiations.

The idea that poetry teaching has to target the “personal” was mentioned by most of the teachers. One teacher affirmed that his aim for each poetry lesson is to ensure “that they walk out of my lecture room feeling that they have been enriched”; in order for this to happen “I always try to look at poems in a way that is strictly personal” (TA). Another teacher pointed out that “poetry is com-

munication between persons and I feel that we often ignore this personal element" (TC). For him and his colleagues "poetry is not the conveying of objective knowledge; it is subjective, it starts as subjective knowledge" (TC). Given that "poetry is an intimate thing" the teachers seek to cultivate "the connections between the poem and [students'] own life and the life around them" (TG). The emphasis on "poetry's relevance to their own life" is considered important because "if you don't identify with something and if you don't find any relevance to it then [...] it's useless I'm trying to tell you this is a beautiful thing, this is something you should be looking at" (TG). Nonetheless, in the observed lessons only a few of the teachers encouraged students to forge connections between a poem and their own lives and experiences.

For the majority of these teachers "a poem needs an emotional kind of attachment on the part of the reader" and if students are not willing "to read with their feelings" then "it's difficult to understand it [...] unless they feel it they won't get it" (TH). These teachers believe that "poetry is in the experience and not necessarily in the meaning" (TD) and that it acts as "a two way commitment [...] a personal kind of conversation" (TC) that "requires an emotional response" (TA). One teacher explained that "the poem has a body and a soul, it has a spirit, something that you cannot remove" and in order for students to understand it "the first thing to do is to see the poem as a whole from a distance and try to ask themselves what it's about and then see how this spirit is created" (TB). Given that "poetry is elusive and forces you to go beneath the surface [...] students need to use their intuition to fully experience it otherwise it would just be damn difficult" (TA). Students are thus told, "don't think but feel [...] first allow it to work on your heart and then use your head" (TA). Despite the fact that most of the interviewed teachers emphasised the importance of the personal growth model in the teaching of poetry, aspects of this approach were noted in only half the observed lessons. One teacher told the class that "Poetry is not only about meaning but also about the experience, feelings" (TD) while a colleague of his mentioned an idea which he later repeated in the interview: "Don't think but feel; if you think you're lost" (TA). It seems clear that there exists a mismatch between teachers' discourse about the teaching of poetry and the way they actually approach it in class.

4.6 Analysing Poetry

The teachers seem to believe that the enrichment provided by poetry is only possible by means of an analytic approach. As one teacher put it, "in poetry you get to the meanings or to the ambiguities, the richness or meanings through words and this is the primary objective in appreciating poetry" (TC). Some of the

teachers believe that “poetry requires a more intense kind of reading because it’s not just what the poet is trying to say but how it’s being said” (TD) and this leads them to cultivate students’ “ability to dissect, to dig deeper” (TE). For one teacher “one very effective way [...] of teaching poetry is to actually consider the poem as a layered medium”, especially since “the *raison d’être* of poetry is connotation” (TE). According to a colleague of his, “poetry requires analysis, you need to break it down and analyse what the words mean” (TF). She explained that this “takes time, years actually. This is difficult for students to develop. Their essays are sometimes very simple; they find it hard to engage in analysis” (TF). It seems as if students are perceived as apprentices learning the craft of analysing poetry from an expert reader who holds the keys to their understanding of a poem.

During the observed lessons all the teachers apart from one engaged in a line-by-line analysis of the poem, with the analytical process being mentioned on a number of occasions. For example, one teacher launched his explanation of the poem by saying, “Let’s take it to bits” (TA). A colleague of his informed the class that “For poetry you need analytical skills. That’s what you’re meant to take from crit” (TF). Another teacher used the metaphor of digging when talking about the analytical process and told students, “Go deeper as I always tell you to. Remember what I said about the onion” (TE). Some teachers selected poems typical of examination papers and one teacher informed students that “It’s important for you to be able to analyse this kind of poem” (TH). Students were often reminded that these analytical skills were needed in order to pass their examination: “Remember that you’ll be doing this on your own in the exam; I won’t be there to help you” (TF). However, despite these references to learner autonomy, teacher talk predominated over all other lesson events, with teachers’ explanations occurring 78 % of the time. In contrast, students’ initiations occurred for only about 20 % of the time. The latter figure is very close to the frequency of teachers’ references to the examination (17 %). In some of the observed lessons it was implied that analytical skills take time to develop and that poetry is a difficult genre: “Don’t expect to understand a poem immediately. You have to read and read” (TC). While explaining to the class a particular image from the poem, one teacher said, “This is why poetry is so damn difficult” (TA). This data seems to underscore the idea that despite advocating the value of personal enrichment, teachers still approach poetry in a very transmissive manner that is almost entirely based on repeatedly modelling how to analyse a poem for hidden meaning.

4.7 The Enigma of Poetry

More than half the teachers complained that students “are preconditioned to look at poetry as having a buried meaning and that during crit we are meant to bring that out” (TG). One teacher clarified this by saying that “a lot of students [...] believe that the key to a good critical appreciation is discovering what lies beneath the words. So they look at the poem as if they have to decipher a hidden code which will tell them what the poem is about” (TD). These teachers affirmed that they “discourage” (TG) students from adopting such a stance, insisting that “all they have to do is read it carefully” (TF). They tell students that “meaning can’t exist without the poem’s handling of language” (TA); that “the language of the poem cannot be forgotten in trying to find some kind of hidden treasure” (TD). Three of these teachers try to make students aware of the “notion of poetry resisting meaning” but “sometimes they fail to see that; they think it’s all a mystery” (TA).

Nevertheless, in the observed lessons half the teachers did give a lot of importance to the poem’s content and they did ask students to think about the poem’s meaning. For example, at the beginning of the lesson one teacher asked her class, “What do you think is it about? What’s the meaning?” (TH). A colleague of hers told the students, “I’d like you to do it, to find things in the poem” (TB). These teachers’ actions might have perhaps been motivated by the fact that “whatever we might think of poetry we are ultimately preparing them for an important exam” (TB). It is this reality that probably made many of the interviewed teachers identify with the situation presented in Billy Collins’s “An Introduction to Poetry.”

4.8 Torturing Poetry

Just over half the teachers conceded that Collins’s poem describes their experience during a poetry lesson, especially in the way it “brings in the distinction of the pleasure of poetry as compared to the torture” (TF). Three of them declared that despite their efforts to “make them appreciate poetry [...] you find students who try to do it mechanically” (TB). One teacher claimed that “you want them to get curious and they just want to get the answer [...] their failure is in curiosity” (TA). Students end up “torturing me to tell them. They want the answer; they think I have all the answers” (TA). However, it is possible that students are conditioned to act in this way because in class they are not sufficiently encouraged to initiate a response to the text.

Some of the teachers admitted that what is partly responsible for students’ attitude towards poetry is “the way they are taught” (TD). According to one

interviewee some teachers “have this kind of fetish of showing or inculcating into their students the idea that a poem contains a message or a moral” (TC). Students torture poetry “because basically that’s what we are driving our students to do, to find the meaning for a poem” (TG). This happens because “the way the exam is at the moment is not allowing for an appreciation of the use of language” (TG). Since students “want to pass an exam [...] they think that there is a certain way of doing things” (TH). One interviewee implied that teachers might also be to blame for this by saying that “unfortunately we’re too exam oriented” (TF). She explained that “the dissection of a poem in class” could lead students to “think that I’m dissecting it too much”, despite any efforts “to make it not look like I’m analysing it too much, that I am enjoying it” (TF). She went on to say that “I’d love them to think of me as a person who is making them enjoy poetry. Even though I don’t read poetry I love it” (TF). For another teacher it has to do with the fact that “our students are not being given the chance to express themselves” (TA). A colleague of his agreed with this idea and pointed out that “most of them are afraid of making a mistake because education has drummed into them that when you speak out in class you have to be right and the teacher has to applaud you” (TG). These admissions seem to indicate that some of the teachers are aware of their responsibility for the way students approach poetry. They hold themselves accountable for perpetuating the practice of analysing poetry in such a stringent manner that it is almost comparable to “torture.”

5 Conclusion

This paper shows that teachers seem to have deep-seated beliefs about the value of studying poetry as a linguistic and cultural artefact. They feel that it needs to continue being studied if students are to benefit from its potential to help enhance their understanding of language and to enrich and transform them on a personal level. Poetry is ascribed a substantial amount of cachet because it is considered a unique kind of genre in terms of its complex layers. Teachers thus feel obliged to act as gatekeepers who coach their apprentices in the art of unravelling meaning. Ironically, they adopt this stance despite not reading a lot of poetry and perhaps without fully acknowledging that the act of inflating poetry’s cachet and associating it solely with academic study might be leading students to feel alienated from it. The implications of these beliefs and practices are that students might come to perceive poetry as inherently enigmatic and that they are expected to mimic the way their teachers approach it in class without realising that it is meant to be something that they should enjoy reading.

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