‘Poetry is not just about decoding meaning’: Kate Lilley on poetry education

Daniel Xerri, University of Malta

ABSTRACT

This article examines contemporary approaches to poetry education through an in-depth interview with Australian poet and academic Kate Lilley, whose distinguished career spans creative and scholarly domains. The interview investigates several critical dimensions of poetry pedagogy: the genre’s position within contemporary cultural discourse; structural challenges within the Australian educational framework; and optimal instructional methodologies. Lilley articulates the necessity of transcending conventional meaning-centred analytical approaches in favour of material and experiential engagement with poetic texts. She advocates for increased integration of contemporary poetry into curriculums, universal access to poet visits in schools and experiential writing opportunities for students. The discussion encompasses teacher education, emphasising the imperative for enhanced professional development in contemporary poetics. Lilley’s perspective challenges exclusionary pedagogical practices while promoting methodological innovations that facilitate engagement across the full spectrum of student abilities and backgrounds rather than restricting poetry education to academically privileged cohorts.

Keywords:

Kate Lilley, poetry education, poetry, contemporary Australian poetry, teaching poetry

Introduction

Kate Lilley is an award-winning contemporary Australian poet and a scholar specialising in early modern women’s literature. She directed the University of Sydney’s creative writing program for almost a decade, and is currently the poetry editor of the journal *Southerly*. The daughter of the writers Merv Lilley and Dorothy Hewett, she published her first poem and won the Artlook/Shell Literary Award in her early teens. Her first collection was *Versary* (2002), which was followed by *Ladylike* (2012) and *Tilt* (2018). The latter was the recipient of the Victorian Premier’s Prize for Poetry. She also produced two chapbooks – *Round Vienna* (2011) and *Realia* (2013) – and edited her mother’s *Selected poems* (2010) and Mary Cavendish’s *The blazing world and other writings* (2002).

Describing herself as a ‘cosmopolitan Australian poet’, Lilley sees her work as being aligned ‘with the multifarious histories of feminist and queer textual experimentation going back at least to the Renaissance’ (as cited in Brennan, 2011). As a result of her academic interests, she ‘has managed to “hybridize” her scholarly literary work with the creation of poetic texts in a unique manner’, succeeding in ‘creat[ing] a poetry and poetic that are original, dynamic, innovative, and decidedly feminist’ (Kinsella, 2013, p. 489). In some of her work, she ‘foregrounds the practices of writing and reading, dissolves the synthesis of form and content, and challenges the notion of generic categorisation’ (Sheehy, 2009, p. 96). Some of her poems ‘function through the accretion of unadorned detail and, in doing so, interrogate that act of depiction itself’ (Ferney, 2018). According to Lucas (2012), ‘Lilley’s poetic style is generally associative, sometimes

using extra-logical linkages between words and images – sometimes these are metaphoric images, sometimes a juxtaposition of text with a collage of visual images that problematise both the genre and the reading experience' (p. 61). In this way, Lilley's body of work exemplifies a bold and innovative approach to poetry, challenging conventional boundaries while remaining deeply rooted in feminist and queer literary traditions.

Besides her achievements in the use of form and technique, Lilley's poetry is also celebrated for how 'it works on things and ideas that are being publicly discussed right now, and that affect the social and personal lives of most people, things like gender, sexuality, violence and power' (Smith, 2018). For instance, given the influence of her personal experiences, Lilley's poetry highlights the complexities of representing childhood trauma and female sexuality, particularly when the available rhetoric often seeks to confine, resolve or explain them within patriarchal frameworks (Vickery, 2016). Her poetry engages with such pressing issues 'without recourse to dull or didactic writing' (Smith, 2018), so much so that in his review of her first collection, Ryan (2003) claimed that 'Lilley's poetry often uses the same tropes of [country and western] songs – love lost and found – stylised into poetry' (p. 321). While her 'poetry is resolutely "literary"' (Brown, 2005, p. 117) – which means that having some knowledge of rhetoric, semiotics, and postmodernism might enhance one's appreciation of it – it is entirely possible to derive a wide range of pleasures from reading it without any prior understanding of poetics or its influences. Thus, Lilley's poetry masterfully navigates the intersection of the personal and the political, offering readers both intellectual depth and emotional resonance while questioning and enriching contemporary discourses on identity and power.

Key to the reader's enjoyment of Lilley's work is her idea that 'Poetry, as a mode of thinking, feeling and formal experimentation, promotes complex and open-ended engagement with being in the world' (as cited in Brennan, 2011). A decade later she added to this idea by affirming,

> It is no accident that in this time of great political and institutional conservatism and authoritarianism, when an ever-increasing and highly literate global precariat is trying to create and defend alternative ways of thinking, writing, and living, more poetry is being published, performed, read and heard by a wider range of Australian voices than ever before. (Lilley, 2021, p. 168)

In this context, Lilley's work showcases the transformative potential of poetry as a medium for exploring and confronting the complexities of contemporary life, fostering both personal reflection and collective resistance.

Situating the interview

This interview with Lilley was conducted at the University of Sydney. It forms part of a series of articles in which I examine the views of contemporary Australian poets on poetry education. It is also connected to a series of interviews I have conducted with poets based in other English-speaking countries about the role and significance of poetry education (see Table 1).

Table 1

List of published poet interviews

Poets from Australia	**Citation**
Luka Lesson	Xerri, 2016c, 2024b
David Musgrave	Xerri, 2016d
Candy Royalle	Xerri, 2017a
Tamryn Bennett	Xerri, 2018a
Judith Beveridge	Xerri, 2024c
Poets from other Anglophone contexts	**Citation**
John Rice	Xerri, 2012
Michael Rosen	Xerri, 2014b, 2014c
Chelley McLear	Xerri, 2017b
Gerald Dawe	Xerri, 2024a
Robert Pinsky	Xerri, 2024d

In light of the fact that poets have largely been excluded from scholarly discussion on the subject, these interviews serve the purpose of showcasing the views of a range of poets-cum-educators who have a deep understanding of both contemporary poetics and the challenges within their respective country's educational system. Using a semi-structured interview method, this research is designed to elicit the poets' views on the status of poetry in education,

the benefits of poetry writing, and the support that teachers need to become more effective poetry educators.

This interview with Lilley can be contextualised within the ongoing scholarly discourse on poetry education, particularly as articulated in my previous research, which highlights the perceived crisis in poetry education, emphasising that many students and educators view poetry as irrelevant or elitist, leading to their disengagement from this literary form. This crisis is not merely a reflection of students' interests, but is shaped by the pedagogical approaches employed in certain classrooms, which often fail to engage students with contemporary and multimodal forms of poetry (Xerri, 2016a). A common theme in this research is the 'torture' of poetry, with teachers and students approaching poetry as a puzzle to be solved, focusing on analysis and the search for hidden meanings (Xerri, 2013a). This approach is often attributed to assessment pressures and shared beliefs about poetry's inherent difficulty (Xerri, 2013a, 2017c). The role of literary theory is also debated in this research, with some educators asking for its inclusion to enhance students' reading experience and others expressing concerns about its complexity at the post-16 level (Xerri, 2013b). Additionally, poetry writing is often neglected due to concerns about assessment and the belief that not everyone can be a poet (Xerri, 2013c). However, proponents emphasise its potential benefits for language development, self-expression and critical reading skills (Xerri, 2013c). My research also highlights the importance of student engagement and the teacher's role in fostering a lifelong appreciation for poetry (Xerri, 2014a, 2018b). These elements are particularly relevant within the context of assessment-driven poetry education practices, which are recognised as potentially limiting engagement and overemphasising teacher roles (Xerri, 2016b).

Lilley's work, characterised by its exploration of identity and societal themes, serves as a counterpoint to the crisis in poetry education by demonstrating how the genre can remain relevant and impactful in modern contexts. Her innovative use of language and form invites readers to connect with poetry on a personal level, potentially addressing the disconnect discussed in some of my work. In addition, some of Lilley's observations in the interview align with the call for educators to adopt more dynamic teaching methods that incorporate diverse poetic expressions. This approach could help combat the notion that poetry is a rarefied genre that is only accessible to the few (Xerri, 2016a). By fostering an environment in which poetry is seen as a vital part of cultural education, educators can encourage students to appreciate its significance beyond the classroom. Thus, Lilley's work and views not only exemplify the potential for poetry to engage students meaningfully but also underscore the necessity for pedagogical reform in poetry education to revitalise interest and appreciation among younger generations.

Origins as a poet

Xerri: Could you tell me about how you became a poet?
Lilley: Both my parents were poets: Dorothy Hewett and Merv Lilley. I grew up in a household in which poetry was very present. There were a lot of readings in the house and I went to readings and read poetry and had poetry read to me from the earliest possible times. I started writing poetry when I was very little and started publishing poetry in proper journals when I was 15. Poetry was kind of the air I breathed from very little. I suppose I might have written other things, but for some reason I became particularly attached to poetry. For instance, my brother, Tom Flood, is a novelist, but I was always attached to poetry. I sort of gave it up for a while when I was doing my PhD and I decided I was going to be an academic. For a while I sort of thought that I'd end up teaching poetry rather than writing it. And then I came back to it very strongly by the time I was already an academic. I think it was because of my interest in experimental poetry and poetics, particularly language writing. As it happened, it was just around the time that John Tranter was starting *Jacket Magazine*. I had known John since I was a teenager; he was a friend of my family's. I sent him some new poems I'd written; they were the first things I'd written in a long time. He really liked them and put them into *Jacket*, and from there I just never looked back. Quite surprisingly to me it's become the main thing I do. Even when I started out as an academic, I always did focus on poetry. My PhD was on elegy and gender, and in my teaching at university I always taught some modern poetry. Years later, I found myself running creative writing courses in the English department at the University of Sydney. So, it sort of started out as a sure thing and it has taken various turns. I've never been far away from it, I guess. From quite an early age, it's always been about this relationship with writing, teaching, and poetry.
Xerri: How fortunate do you consider yourself to be to have grown up in a household where poetry was part of the air that you breathe?
Lilley: Nobody knows what their lives would have been like if their circumstances had been different, but I think I was both fortunate to have grown up in that setting and

that for whatever reason I formed a particularly strong connection with poetry. It helped shape me. I have three brothers and a sister, all of whom in their different ways are interested in the literary. I'm the only one that connected to poetry, so it wasn't a foregone conclusion though. I don't know why poetry became my thing, but it certainly is and I have always preferred reading poetry to reading novels. I'm just a poetry person. Even when I was in high school, poetry books were what I was most attached to. I was also attached to kids' books, but I didn't really sort of think of the difference. We were not brought up to think that there were these hard and fast lines. After doing one year of high school in Perth we moved to Sydney. I don't think poetry figured in the curriculum pretty much at all. I remember in the high school certificate there was a poetry question. I remember doing that, but I don't remember it ever being much of a feature of what we did in class.

When I was 16, I won a big poetry competition for a long poem. My school was a public school but it was quite posh. When I won this competition, they got me to read out the poem at assembly. It took about half an hour to read. It was long. It was based on the Truffaut film *The Story of Adele H.*, which deals with Victor Hugo's daughter and her erotomania. It's a good kind of teenage subject, really. So, I read this very, very long poem and I suppose I've always been a good reader. Both of my parents were excellent readers. I grew up in this culture of not just reading, but reading poetry out loud. My father was a big reciter. He had grown up in central Queensland and barely gone to school at all. But he was given an anthology of poems that he memorised. From when he was a young boy till his 90s, he remembered these poems. In his old age he forgot his life, but he could still recite these poems. There's something very powerful about that; it's almost locked in. When I was at school nobody picked on me because of my poetry. In fact, the other kids were very nice about this kind of weird thing. I certainly didn't know anyone else who was interested in poetry or was very literary even. But I did have some bookish friends. I had a friend who would always be reading ancient history. She was crazy about Thucydides and stuff like that. There were some bookish characters around, but I never thought about what was going on in English at school. It meant nothing to me because it paled in comparison to what I was exposed to at home.

Status of poetry

Xerri: Some people have voiced concern about the status of poetry in contemporary culture. They maintain poetry is experiencing a crisis and that its readership is in decline. From your experience of working with young people, do you consider such sentiments to be valid?
Lilley: Working at the University of Sydney has meant working in a very particular kind of context with students who have come through from academically good schools, schools that buy into the cultural capital of poetry. So, the student body I've worked with has probably tended to be more interested than not. However, I'm aware of the concerns being voiced. There were times when I participated in departmental discussions about whether or not poetry courses can stand alone, and if they can, what kind of courses can do so. When I was an undergraduate in Sydney, there were a lot of little seminar courses where you could do specialised classes on whatever the members of staff were particularly interested in. I attended several seminars on a very wide range of poetry: American, Australian, and British. Nowadays, universities don't tend to be like that anymore. There are far fewer courses to choose from when it comes to poetry.

In my courses, I've tended to devote a number of weeks to poetry, even when I've taught postmodernism and other subjects. Among the students who've enrolled on these courses, there are always some who want to write about poetry. They kind of come into the course already set up; they have already read things. But then there'll always be other students who tell me that they haven't enjoyed ever reading poetry and haven't thought of themselves as poetry readers. But they might respond to poetry if you teach them in different ways. So, I've taught lots of film because I'm particularly interested in the relations between film and poetry. I find that that works well. I like to teach texts that are generically experimental, that often might move from poetry to prose, and do things that break down the kind of perceived barriers between prose and poetry. I think students are responsive to that, particularly if you can get across to them the idea that their anxieties about not understanding what something means, not being able to comprehend or parse poetry in the way that they expect to be able to, is not what reading poetry is about. If you can teach them that that's not what poetry is about, and to encourage them to attend to other things, then they realise that it's actually freer than they thought. Then they get interested.

Xerri: Do many students come with the preconception that poetry has to mean something, that there is a hidden meaning in poetry and that they have to decipher it?
Lilley: I think that would be the usual preconception. It tends to be what they're taught at school. Not in every

case, though. Sometimes students do encounter a teacher who thinks something other than that. However, generally, their idea of writing or language is that it's just a vehicle by means of which you understand something else. I guess I try to teach something different to that, but if you take that away it's important to give them something else. That would be all kinds of contextual material, both formal and not. What I find students have most difficulty with is not making the switch from thinking that everything in poetry is meaning-driven to some other way of understanding what texts might be doing and how they might affect you and how you might attach to them. I've found that students very often have a lot of trouble understanding the material of a text. I hadn't expected this when I started teaching poetry. For instance, when we ran a first-year course with around 600 students, I taught most of the poetry on that course. I did Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman with them. My idea was to introduce them to the material study of a text, but most of them were just bewildered by why I would show them a picture of Dickinson's house.

I find that unless they've been exposed to this kind of teaching, even very sophisticated students will have a totally immaterial idea of a text. I think the material is absolutely indispensable, and students don't seem to get there by themselves. I'm not sure if that's partly because of the fact that these students are digital natives, even though the digital could be thought of materially too. When I did outreach work in schools in underprivileged areas of Sydney, I once did some individual work with students who were writing short stories. One student had written a story set in a second-hand bookstore. I said to her, 'It'd be good to have a bit more about the bookstore, and the books themselves.' I asked her whether she'd ever been to a second-hand bookstore, and she said that she hadn't. She had an idea of what a bookstore looked like from having seen a representation of a bookish space in a film about Harry Potter or something. This episode goes to show how important it is to focus on the materiality of texts.

Poetry in education

Xerri: How solid is poetry's status within the Australian educational system?
Lilley: Poetry as a genre to be read features quite well because it has quite a strong place in the curriculum and in schools. Students are also expected to do creative writing but whenever I do talks for teachers of English some of them seem very worried about that. I guess it's hard for them because they don't feel confident teaching creative writing. It's outside their comfort zone and they don't know what to tell the kids. On the other hand, whether they like it or not, students regard creative writing as sort of the main thing in English. Teachers' anxiety about it stems from two things. One is that they might worry that it's not academically proper, that it's not a proper discipline. Two is concern over who's going to teach it.
Xerri: Is there sufficient support for the promotion of poetry in education here in Australia?
Lilley: Poetry is in the curriculum, that much is true. But whenever I look at the curriculum, I'm quite shocked at what kind of poetry is set. Most of it is so old-fashioned. It's almost unbelievable. There's virtually little that's contemporary. Most of the contemporary material that is set is very conservative. There's a lot of mid-20th century Australian poetry, the kind that was set when I was still at school. It seems to hardly have changed. At a time when other parts of the curriculum have experienced massive changes, poetry has become the bastion of conservatism. I don't know what teachers say about this, but it's certainly how it looks like to me. In the past, besides having set texts, there used to be a lot of freedom for teachers to teach whatever they wanted and freedom for students to write about poems of their own choosing. That doesn't seem to be the case now. John Tranter is an interesting case in point. One of his most accessible books is *The floor of heaven*, which is a verse novel. Students doing advanced English could elect to do it, but whenever I offered teachers the possibility of me doing a course on it they always refused. They say that it's too difficult; they won't touch it.

So, I don't think the issue with poetry is just a sort of top-down thing. Part of the issue has to do with who's setting the curriculum; it's producing a very conservative curriculum where poetry is concerned. But there's something else as well. Maybe some teachers are not properly equipped to handle poetry. Word sometimes filters back to me about teachers being horrified by the postmodernity of the new things being touted for inclusion in the curriculum. This might explain why the latest iterations of the curriculum look like an attempt to scale back from making it more contemporary.

Xerri: What could be done to promote contemporary poetry even more broadly in education?
Lilley: I think one of the best things would be if more students were exposed to poets visiting schools. There's a bit of that going on but in selective ways. Red Room Poetry do great things in schools; whenever I've talked to some of the poets who do school visits, they say that the

experience is very good. Generally, kids like that kind of thing because something different is happening at school. Being visited by a performance poet or a well-known poet makes students really excited and really interested. I think such visits make a big difference, not just in relation to poetry. However, poetry is in some ways an easier sell in terms of readings. I mean readings can be deathly, so they have to be done carefully. I think if visits by poets were to become a more regular part of the curriculum, even though not necessarily curricular, students would respond well to that. If they were to happen in the same way that drama events happen then this would affect the way students respond.

Xerri: One of the things that I observed in some schools here in New South Wales is that while some poets do visit schools, teachers choose to expose only a restricted group of students to a poet's work. Sometimes they tend to focus only on the best students. What are your thoughts on that?

Lilley: I guess you can understand why that happens. The students who are doing the most advanced English get special access to things and special treatment. But I think there's no doubt that all students would benefit from the experience. Poetry is not just for the most special students or the most sophisticated ones. Restricting access to poetry just reproduces a logic of privilege in which the aesthetic is cordoned off for the best and brightest. This goes hand in hand with an idea of culture as being sharply divided, of poetry being attached to a high cultural value. It's an idea which sees those less strong as being only good for watching television, while the fancy students can have poems. I object to this from both directions. I think it's good for the fancy students to watch television sometimes and for those less academically inclined to read poetry. You don't want this great divide; it's conservative. It promotes elitism. The idea that the capacity to be interested in or respond to aesthetic texts is directly correlated to academic performance is quite wrong. The nicest part about teaching is when students who didn't know they could be interested in something find that they are. They might have thought poetry wasn't for them, but it suddenly is. It's very rewarding to see that happen.

Benefits of poetry education

Xerri: What are the benefits of teaching poetry writing to young people?

Lilley: I think the main benefit is that it gives them that direct hands-on relationship with writing and with the elements of poetry. You don't have to be a poet to read poetry, but you do have to have some sense of how a poem is put together. The best way to get that is experientially. I always get students to copy out a poem. They often think it's kind of silly to do that, but the sheer fact of having to write down the words and observe where the breaks are makes them see the poem as a piece of language. Their first temptation is to immediately start talking about the poem's meaning, what they take to be the meaning, or saying that it has no meaning. They won't say anything about its material form because they just haven't learned to do that. Joshua Clover at the University of California, Davis, gives his students an exercise in which they have to write out the poem in grammatical categories, substituting each word with its grammatical function. I'm sure that many students here would have a lot of trouble with that because they don't have the necessary language. They'd probably be okay with verbs and nouns, but it would get a bit fuzzy. That sort of exercise is a good thing to do because it causes students to have some kind of direct experience of the construction of a poem. I think it's transformative in terms of their sense of what it is, how it might be, and what it does in the world.

I find that students are usually quite literate about breaking down film. They tend to know something about shots and that kind of thing; they have some vocabulary for that. But they tend to have less vocabulary for written texts like poems. Since they're more attuned to sound and interested in the relationship between sound and the visual dimension, you could teach them poetry in a way that exploits the auditory qualities of a poem. For instance, students are very keyed into the relationship between diegetic and non-diegetic sound in film. They have a sophisticated grasp of the layers of sound and its different origins and functions. So, a poetry teacher can surely do something with this responsiveness to sound given the auditory nature of poetry. The old-fashioned idea that the only thing you can do with the auditory in poetry is to highlight the onomatopoeic stems from a practice of desperation.

Xerri: What do you hope to achieve by the end of a poetry writing workshop with young people?

Lilley: I just hope that they'll have a better sense of the idea that a poem can be many things. Sometimes they have a very rigid sort of idea of what a poem should consist of, which might even involve rhyming. So, I tend to begin with open-ended questions about what might be understood as a poem, and show them weird things they might not immediately consider poetry. I've done various kinds of exercises with students. For instance, after explaining what pantoums are,

we put together pantoums using only newspaper headlines. In that case, I wanted to show them how rhythm functions, either the iambic pentameter or some other high scannable metre. They don't think they're writing serious poetry and they know that it's totally ridiculous, but they have fun in the process. It's also useful because it lets them think of poetic language as something that opens up their relation to language in the world, rather than shuts it down and makes them feel bad or as if they're not smart enough. It helps them realise that poetry isn't about some secret thing going on that they can't get. It helps them to accept the experience of not necessarily having to understand everything. Poetry is not just about decoding meaning.

Xerri: How do they usually respond?

Lilley: If they feel they're not going to be shown up in some way, that it's not some kind of trick that's going to make them look bad, then they enjoy it. I've been lucky because I haven't had to mark much creative writing. The stuff I've done with young people hasn't involved putting a mark on their work. I find marking creative writing difficult; it's not obvious to me how to do it. I've known colleagues who felt anxious about marking it too. What I find hard about it is that I tend to have a higher standard for it; I'm not quite sure how to teach myself to think in terms of gradations. I'm the poetry editor of *Southerly* and since a lot of material comes in, I've learnt to go through it very quickly by making a distinction between what is publishable and not publishable. Once I've done that, depending on how much material has ended up in the publishable pile, then I know I can do something with that. But in my little experience with marking creative writing, not much of what I've seen is publishable. It's not up to that kind of level yet. When working with young students, you don't want to be thinking in that way. The feedback you want to give them on their work needs to reward what they've managed to do with a poem rather than be punitive.

Teachers of poetry

Xerri: Given your experience of working with teachers, what are your views on their approach to poetry teaching?

Lilley: My experience is limited, but when I give talks to teachers and take their questions, I get the sense that most of them don't know much about contemporary poetry. It's all news to them; they're interested and surprised to find that there are so many resources out there. I always give them a lot of web resources so that they can go and find out more about contemporary poetry. It's made me more aware of the idea that if as a teacher you don't know what's going on, if you don't have signposts and know what you're doing, it must be equally very hard for students. They're not in a position to evaluate or to work out what's going on, but if you give them guidance they're good at working it out for themselves. So, I tend to give both teachers and students some pointers. I tell them about various mega sites like the Electronic Poetry Center, PennSound, UbuWeb, and the Poetry Society of America. There are lots of very good sites like these around nowadays, as well as good sites that are attached to teaching anthologies.

Xerri: What kind of support should teachers be given to become more effective poetry teachers?

Lilley: I suppose it would be good if as part of their training, they could benefit from the input of people who work with poetry. It seems like there needs to better communication or synergy between those academics who specialise in teacher education and those who focus on English studies. I think that lack of relation is partly circumstantial, but it probably also comes from something more profound. The same kind of disconnect at times exists between how English is set up to be taught at school and how it's taught at university.

Xerri: What kind of input can people such as yourself, who are both academics and poets, provide to prospective poetry teachers?

Lilley: I think you can do outreach in schools, working with teachers specifically on engaging with poetry. I have colleagues who do workshops in fancy schools, focusing on upskilling both teachers and students so that they can do even better than they already do. There's nothing bad in that; their motives are good. But personally, I'm much more interested in seeing how I can use my expertise to help out in schools that are nothing like that, ones where the teachers don't have PhDs and the students come from underprivileged backgrounds. In such schools, there are insufficient opportunities for them to work on poetry with an actual practitioner.

Xerri: Have you ever been asked to run a workshop for teachers on poetry writing?

Lilley: I've given talks to teachers but I haven't ever done anything with teachers that involved them writing poetry.

Xerri: Is it beneficial for teachers to participate in poetry writing workshops?

Lilley: Yes, because you can't effectively teach something unless you're comfortable with it. Of course, I'm not suggesting that the only way to feel comfortable with poetry is to write it. No academic would ever think that the only way to be knowledgeable about something is by doing it. You don't have to write novels to teach novels. There's obviously this argument that only creative writers can teach creative writing, and I encounter a lot of writers who are quite hostile to the whole academic enterprise of people teaching literature who are not writers. I don't go along with that at all because a person can be a fantastic writer but not really good at teaching. However,

I do believe it's valuable for poetry teachers to have some experience of creative writing. I think there is something to be gained from hands-on workshops that let them see how to teach the same kind of thing to young people.

It's very hard to teach writing, both the creative and the academic kinds. The main difference I see is in terms of the amount of reading that is expected. Whereas it seems to be taken for granted that reading a huge amount is absolutely necessary to get better at academic writing, whether it involves reading theory or other people's critical work, in the case of creative writing the misconception that students and to some degree even teachers seem to hold on to is that you have to write rather than read. I've met many writing students who were actively hostile to reading. They seem to believe that reading would interfere with their originality. It's a disastrous misconception that turns into some kind of unbridled narcissism. It makes students only interested in themselves and not necessarily interested in writing, except in so far as it is a vehicle for them to express themselves. So, a poetry writing workshop for teachers should avoid falling into the same trap.

Xerri: How important is it for teachers to position themselves as writers and readers of poetry in order to teach effectively?

Lilley: It's probably hugely important. If students see their teachers having a positive relation to writing and reading, that encourages emulation and helps them find out for themselves what they might be interested in and what they might like. Your teaching will only work if the skills and the pleasures are transferable. One of the things that distresses me most about poetry education is that students through no fault of their own just read the things that are part of their course. So, it's hugely important to think carefully about showing different things to students. If they find they're interested in something, they can go in that direction on their own. But if you don't have a teacher who is familiar with a range of material, as a student it's very difficult to get anywhere.

Xerri: In light of the fact that some teachers might not be people who enjoy reading, let alone writing, what can be done to change this kind of culture?

Lilley: That's a hard question. If they really don't enjoy reading literature, they probably shouldn't be teaching it. I don't know why people would end up working as English teachers if they don't like reading. While a lot of teachers probably are not very attuned to poetry or lack the formal vocabulary or equipment to engage with it properly, they probably value things about the poems they teach. At the same time, the curriculum puts them in a pretty intolerable position because it limits them to certain texts. There's so very little room for personal manoeuvres there. For teachers of English, it's difficult to feel that that there's anything contemporary about most of the poems they're expected to teach. The contemporary is what an awful lot of teachers and students depend on to feel that the poem connects to their sense of the world. As a teacher, you're likely to do much better teaching non-contemporary material if you begin from the contemporary.

Conclusion

Lilley's views on poetry education offer a contrasting perspective to the challenges and concerns highlighted in my research. Whereas some of my work has revealed a tendency on the part of teachers and students to engage in the 'torture' of poetry, with an emphasis on analysis and the search for hidden meanings (Xerri, 2013a, 2016b), Lilley advocates for a different approach. She believes that poetry is not just about decoding meaning but about experiencing the materiality of the text and its effects on the reader. This suggests a need for a shift in pedagogical practices, moving away from conventional meaning-centred approaches towards a more experiential and holistic engagement with poetry. Furthermore, Lilley's emphasis on incorporating contemporary poetry into the curriculum challenges the conservatism preferred by certain teachers of poetry (Xerri, 2017c). Whereas they might rely on traditional canonical poets, Lilley believes in exposing students to a wider range of contemporary poetry, including works that are generically and formally experimental. This suggests a need for teachers to expand their knowledge of contemporary poetry and to embrace pedagogical approaches that can facilitate students' engagement with diverse poetic expressions (Xerri, 2018b).

Lilley's views on poetry education also challenge the notion that poetry is a difficult and rarefied genre, accessible only to the few. She believes that all students can benefit from poetry education, regardless of their academic ability or background. This challenges the elitism observed in some of my research on poetry classrooms, where the genre is often seen as the preserve of academically privileged students (Xerri, 2016a). Lilley's perspective suggests a need for more inclusive pedagogical practices that can foster engagement with poetry across the full spectrum of student abilities and backgrounds. Finally, her advocacy for increased poet visits in schools and experiential writing opportunities for students aligns with the call for more dynamic and engaging teaching methods (Xerri, 2016a). Whereas some of my research reveals a reliance on traditional essay-based assessment

and a neglect of poetry writing, potentially limiting students' creative engagement with poetry (Xerri, 2013c, 2016b), Lilley's perspective suggests a need for pedagogical approaches that can provide students with hands-on experiences of poetry, enabling them to develop a deeper understanding of its construction and to explore their own creative potential.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Kate Lilley for granting me this interview.

ACTIONS AFTER READING

Consider

- Consider whether poetry is currently being presented to students mainly as a text to decode, and how lessons might instead invite attention to sound, form, materiality, affect, and personal response.
- Consider whether all students, regardless of perceived ability or academic pathway, are given meaningful access to poetry, poet visits, poetry writing, and other creative encounters with the genre.

Discuss

- Discuss with colleagues how contemporary poetry, including experimental, multimodal, spoken word, and locally relevant poetry, might be incorporated more regularly alongside canonical texts.
- Discuss the kinds of professional learning teachers need in order to feel more confident teaching poetry as readers, writers, and facilitators of creative engagement.

Respond

- Review one existing poetry lesson or unit and modify it so that students do something experiential with the poem, such as reading it aloud, copying it out, changing its form, responding creatively, or writing in dialogue with it, before moving into analytical interpretation.

References

Brennan, M. (2011, June 7). *Interview with Kate Lilley*. Poetry International. https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/article/104-20326_Interview-with-Kate-Lilley/

Brown, P. (2005). Notes on recent Australian poetry: A talk given at the University of Auckland, 14th September 2005. *Ka mate ka ora: A New Zealand Journal of Poetry and Poetics*, *1*, 104–121. https://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/kmko/01/ka_mate01_brown.pdf

Ferney, L. (2018, August 30). *Liam Ferney reviews Kate Lilley and Pam Brown*. Cordite Poetry Review. http://cordite.org.au/reviews/ferney-lilley-brown/

Kinsella, J. (2013). *Spatial relations: Essays, reviews, commentaries, and chorography*. Brill.

Lilley, K. (2021). Archiving the undercommons: An infrastructural reading of contemporary Australian poetry. In D. Disney & M. Hall (Eds.), *New directions in contemporary Australian poetry* (pp. 159–169). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-76287-2_13

Lucas, R. (2012). Petticoat slide. *Australian Book Review*, *342*, 61.

Ryan, G. (2003). Reviews. *Australian Feminist Studies*, *18*(42), 321–324. https://doi.org/10.1080/08164604032000171412

Sheehy, J. (2009). Pleasure in the gap: Kate Lilley's cross-pollinated poetic and academic discourses. *Sydney Studies in English*, *35*, 96–111. https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/SSE/article/view/2120

Smith, A.J. (2018, September 3). *A book is a good place to think*. Sydney Review of Books. https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/reviews/a-book-is-a-good-place-to-think

Vickery, A. (2016). When she refuses to settle: Reading adolescent female sexuality and sexual abuse in the poetry of Genna Gardini and Kate Lilley. *Wasafiri*, *31*(2), 68–73. https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2016.1145458

Xerri, D. (2012). Poetry on the subway: An interview with children's poet John Rice. *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, *18*(2), 105–115. http://doi.org/10.1080/13614541.2012.716691

Xerri, D. (2013a). Colluding in the 'torture' of poetry: Shared beliefs and assessment. *English in Education*, *47*(2), 134–146. http://doi.org/10.1111/eie.12012

Xerri, D. (2013b). 'Dissecting butterflies': Literary theory and poetry teaching in post-16 education. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, *18*(4), 205–214. http://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2013.813862

Xerri, D. (2013c). Poetry writing in the post-16 English curriculum. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, *12*(2), 140–155.

Xerri, D. (2014a). Critical reading and student engagement with poetry. In S. Dymoke, M. Barrs, A. Lambirth & A. Wilson (Eds.), *Making poetry happen: Transforming the poetry classroom* (pp. 29–35). Bloomsbury.

Xerri, D. (2014b). 'Poetry is a tremendous ally': Children's poet Michael Rosen on teachers' attitudes towards poetry. *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, *20*(2), 112–122. http://doi.org/10.1080/13614541.2014.929439

Xerri, D. (2014c). Schools as 'poetry-friendly places': Michael Rosen on poetry in the curriculum. *Arts Education Policy Review*, *115*(4), 151–158. http://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2014.948346

Xerri, D. (2016a). 'Living in a house without mirrors': Poetry's cachet and student engagement. *Anglica: An International Journal of English Studies*, *25*(1), 271–286.

Xerri, D. (2016b). 'Poems look like a mathematical equation': Assessment in poetry education. *International Journal of English Studies*, *16*(1), 1–17. http://doi.org/10.6018/ijes/2016/1/235261

Xerri, D. (2016c). 'Poetry does really educate': An interview with spoken word poet Luka Lesson. *English in Australia*, *51*(1), 18–24.

Xerri, D. (2016d). 'We need to demystify poetry': An interview with David Musgrave. *Symposia Melitensia*, *12*, 189–202.

Xerri, D. (2017a). Combating voice poverty through spoken word poetry: An interview with Candy Royalle. *Journal of Poetry Therapy: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Practice, Theory, Research and Education*, *30*(4), 262–270. http://doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2017.1352066

Xerri, D. (2017b). Inspiring young people to be creative: Northern Ireland's poetry in motion for schools. *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, *14*(1), 127–137. http://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2016.1268166

Xerri, D. (2017c). Teachers' beliefs and literature teaching: The case of poetry. In B. Schaff, J. Schlegel & C. Surkamp (Eds.), *The institution of English literature: Formation and mediation* (pp. 207–229). V & R Unipress. https://doi.org/10.14220/9783737006293.207

Xerri, D. (2018a). Engaging teachers and students with writing's quantum of poetry: Australia's Red Room Poetry. *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, *15*(3), 360–369. https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2017.1405994

Xerri, D. (2018b). Poetry teaching in Malta: The interplay between teachers' beliefs and practices. In A. Goodwyn, C. Durrant, L. Reid & L. Scherff (Eds.), *International perspectives on the teaching of literature in schools* (pp. 133–141). Routledge.

Xerri, D. (2024a). Finding a language that works for them: Gerald Dawe on young people's engagement with poetry. *Irish Studies Review*, *32*(4), 603–613. https://doi.org/10.1080/09670882.2024.2413434

Xerri, D. (2024b). 'Poetry is on its way back up': A spoken word performer's contribution to young people's engagement with poetry. *Journal of Poetry Therapy: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Practice, Theory, Research and Education*, *38*(2), 115–127. https://doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2024.2381620

Xerri, D. (2024c). 'Some of the barriers get broken down': Judith Beveridge on poetry education. *Australian Journal of English Education*, *59*(2), 48–52.

Xerri, D. (2024d). 'Teaching poetry is like having a liquor store on a busy corner': An interview with Robert Pinsky. *English*, *73* (280–281), 3–10. https://doi.org/10.1093/english/efae010

Biographical notes

Daniel Xerri is an Associate Professor at the Centre for Academic Literacies and English Communication Skills, University of Malta. He has conducted extensive research on poetry education and creativity. Some of this research has involved interviews with contemporary poets in Australia, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the USA.