

# Mountain Climbing in the Poetry Classroom in Malta: Teaching a Stevens Metapoem

DANIEL XERRI

## INTRODUCTION

THE CRITICAL READING of poetry in a number of international secondary school contexts seems to be restricted to paraphrasing a poem, device-spotting, and discussing themes. This approach seems divorced from a consideration of the aesthetic qualities of poetry. My PhD research at the high school where I used to teach until recently has revealed that teachers' and students' approaches to poetry in class are driven by an intense concern with what a poem means. The emphasis placed on a poem's meaning is partly due to their entrenched belief that a poem has a hidden meaning that can be unearthed by means of a teacher-led, line-by-line analysis. This approach places the teacher in the position of a gatekeeper to meaning, especially since the class discussion of the poem is mostly characterized by the teacher's explanations of what the lines mean. The belief that poetry is a difficult genre that can be mediated to students only via teachers' intervention leads the latter to adopt a pedagogical approach to poetry that consolidates their role as gatekeepers (Xerri). This article illustrates the idea that one way of challenging such beliefs and practices is through a consideration of poetry as an aesthetic product.

The conception that poetry has a hidden meaning is most often detached from how meaning operates in poetry. The linguist and stylistician Henry Widdowson affirms that "*What* poems mean cannot be explained, but *how* they mean can be, and such explanation . . . provides the general conditions for individual interpretation" (71). With this in mind, I set out to teach Wallace Stevens's "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain" (all citations hereafter appearing on *CPP* 435). It is considered one of Stevens's best-known metapoems, this being one of the reasons why I chose to focus on it. Defined as "a poem about poetry and the meaning of art" (Widdowson 67), a metapoem has the potential to demystify poetry and make students aware of how meaning is generated in poetry. Moreover, my choice of poem was very much in line with the idea that it emblemizes Stevens's "lifelong project: that of transforming the world

of 'reality' into the world of 'imagination,' into the world of the poem" (Naylor 47). The poem's emphasis is "on the transformative power of the poet—the power to compose a world of one's own making, a landscape of pure acts of the imagination" (47–48). The poem elicits "a fresh realisation of the world's separate existence from the meanings the poet may temporarily impose on it" (Beckett 202). In this sense, I hoped that the metapoem would serve to broaden students' conceptions of poetry and of how it functioned.

## CONTEXT

The lesson discussed in this article took place at a high school in Malta with students aged between 16 and 18 for whom English is a second language. Malta's bilingual status is a result of its colonial heritage, and the majority of the population prides itself on being fluent in both English and Maltese. The study of English in Malta has for many decades valued the importance of a literary education, which is for the most part centered on the Anglo-American literary tradition. This means that literature is taught in the same way that it is taught to native speakers of English and for similar purposes. English literature is a staple part of students' secondary education, with formative and summative kinds of assessment being used to test their appreciation of a variety of literary texts and genres. The pedagogical practices that teachers adopt in schools are necessarily influenced by the fact that literature forms part of an assessment-driven educational culture.

The lesson was conducted with three classes of students being prepared for the Matriculation Certificate examination in English, an Advanced Level examination that students usually sit for at the age of 18 after following a two-year course. This nine-hour, high-stakes examination consists of a number of language and literature components, including two focusing on poetry. One of the poetry components is comprised of a set text (e.g., one of Wilfred Owen's war poems) while the other consists of an unseen poem. In the examination, candidates are provided with one hour for each component, both of which are assessed by means of an essay that must not be shorter than 400 words. Preparation for the set text is conducted via lectures while preparation for the unseen poem is provided through seminars, both of which occur on a weekly basis throughout the academic year. The lesson described in this article was held in one of these one-hour seminars.

The approach to unseen poetry that is typically used with Maltese students involves their being provided with a printed copy of a poem that they would have never encountered before. After being asked to read it silently, the teacher leads an analysis of it using inductive questioning to

encourage students to identify the meaning of each line. Most often the students' exposure to the poem's rhythm and musicality occurs only if the teacher chooses to read it aloud. After the poem is exhaustively analyzed, students are sometimes asked to write an essay about it that is meant to focus on the following elements: theme, diction, imagery, versification, tone, and structure. In my experience, students most often focus heavily on the theme, seeing this as an approximation of what the poem "is about." Hence, the aesthetic and linguistic features of the poem are usually glossed over and when students attempt to write about these they struggle to do so effectively.

#### CHOICE OF UNSEEN POEM

To provide students with an opportunity of experiencing a different way of conducting critical reading in class, I chose to make a number of adjustments to the above approach. The fact that Stevens's metapoem acted as my point of departure was perhaps the first marked difference. A cursory look at the unseen poems that featured in examination past papers and tutorial tasks over the previous few years confirmed that Stevens's poetry was entirely absent, perhaps because of the misconception that his work would be too difficult for second-language speakers of English. However, as argued by Milton Bates in an article on teaching Stevens's poetry in China, "For the most part . . . his poetry is not beyond the reach of students who read him in their second or third language. He was surprisingly accessible to the bright and well-prepared students whom it was my privilege to teach" (179). Bates argues that his students were better prepared for reading Stevens's poetry than their American counterparts because of the strong poetic tradition in their culture and their lack of fear of poetry. While Malta has a healthy tradition of poetry that students are introduced to early in their education, from my research I knew that the majority of Advanced Level English students at my school were afraid of poetry because they associated it with hidden meanings. Nonetheless, I did not consider this to be a good enough reason to bar them from engaging with Stevens's work, it being an epitome of modern poetry. In his advice on teaching modern poetry, Steve Prince suggests that "For many novice readers most modern poems might just as well be written in a foreign language" (236); hence, it is best to build up students' confidence by giving them plenty of poems to read critically. After all, as Christian Calliannis points out in an article on teaching Stevens's poetry in France, giving students such exposure to modern poetry should not be too difficult for second- and foreign-language speakers of English given that "Poetry itself is a kind of foreign language, a language freshly built within the language" (193).

The main reason why I opted for Stevens's "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain" was my awareness of the fact that students' study of poetry was almost entirely devoid of poems that contain an element of self-reflexivity. According to Alfred Weber, a poem can be deemed self-reflexive when it deals "with the poet (his position and function in the culture and society of his time), with the writing of poetry (the creative process and the problems of language), and/or with the poem (the work of art, its structure and its quality)" (10). Eva Müller-Zettelmann explains that "Metalyric poems refer to lyric inspiration, to the poetic creative process, to the social task of literary creation, or to the intended reader's reception" (132). The reference to the reader is important here given that self-reflexive poetry entails the active participation of the reader in generating meaning. I chose to use Stevens's poem because I wanted my students to read a text that could manifest the process of poetic composition and the role played by the individual imagination.

#### THE LESSON

The lesson was divided into three stages. The first consisted of the students listening to and reading the poem. The next stage involved the students discussing the poem in small groups. This was followed by their writing a paragraph of around half a page on Stevens's use of language in the poem.

The students' first encounter with the poem was conducted via an audio recording of Stevens reciting his poem at Harvard University in 1952. The reason why I started the lesson with a recording rather than a print version of the poem was in order to help students appreciate the significance of sound in poetry. In fact, John Gordon believes that "a curricular gap in attention to aural dimensions, though overt in the early years and tacitly assumed in the upper levels of attainment, is untenable with regard to the way pupils can and do understand poetry as sound" (173). After listening to the poem twice, the students discussed how Stevens's reading seems to mimic the act of climbing a mountain, with lengthy pauses capturing the sensation of stopping to catch one's breath. The students were then provided with a printed copy and allowed to listen to it once more. This time round they could follow the words on the page as Stevens recited them.

What is reported in the next section is a condensation of what I noted the students doing and saying in the first two stages of the lesson, as well as what I analyzed in the writing they produced in the last stage.

First describing it as “a layered poem,” students then worked in pairs in order to identify the places in each line where Stevens pauses; this made them aware of how the poem’s punctuation guides the reading. This also led them to note how the poem is constructed of three declarative sentences, the first two stanzas being made up of a sentence each. They pointed out that while these two stanzas describe the completed poem lying “in the dust of his table,” the next five stanzas are made up of one long sentence describing how it came to be composed. The students remarked on the fact that the poem is spoken by someone in the third person who is describing a poet’s interaction with the poem that took the place of a mountain.

The students employed their knowledge of the linguistics they studied as part of their course to comment on how the pronoun “it” in the first line acts as a cataphoric reference (i.e., a word that takes its reference from a following word or phrase) to “The poem” in the second line. A few of them said that “word for word” is ironic because, while the phrase suggests the idea of something being verbatim, the poem is a representation of a mountain that has been “recomposed” and changed in the process. They commented on how, when art takes the place of reality, the created product can never be an exact replica nor is it meant to be. Nonetheless, they also suggested that once a poem is written, a picture is painted, or a photo is taken, in the eyes of the artist/reader the artifact almost becomes the thing that is being represented. Hence, a photo of a mountain is referred to as “a mountain” rather than as “a photo of a mountain.”

For the students, the word “breathed” conveyed the idea that the act of thinking of the poem equals the act of breathing the mountain air, this idea dovetailing into a consideration of how the persona is “reminded” of the experience of searching for “A place to go to in his own direction” by the very poem he wrote about it. They also noted that the book’s position face down on the table seems to represent the shape of a mountain. There was some discussion of the significance of the “place” the persona looked for. A number of students came up with the interpretation that such a “place” provides one with perspective on life and the self as long as it is of one’s choosing, hence the importance of the phrase “in his own direction.” For them the act of climbing a mountain was an extended metaphor for a journey of self-discovery. According to one student, “This poem is meaningful because it represents the entire journey of seeking self-fulfillment rather than just the moment when one reaches one’s goal.”

The word “recomposed” in the fourth stanza made them think of the definition of the term “composition” in art, as a synonym for a creative work like a poem or a piece of music, as well as the arrangement of the parts of a painting or photo. The presence of this verb in the poem made

them aware that to compose is to produce an art piece, which necessarily entails shifting the elements forming part of the reality one wants to represent. The use of the prefix *re-* was deemed to be both a reference to this transformation of the composition of reality and a subtle indication of the reader's own re-composition of meaning every time the poem is read. The students noted that "picked his way" is associated with the idea of the persona going "in his own direction," in search of "the outlook that would be right." For them "outlook" consolidated the notion of looking for perspective. The choice of the adjective "right" implied a subjective evaluation that only the individual can arrive at. In the words of one student, "The poem reminds the reader how one sometimes needs to look at one's habitual life from a different perspective."

The students agreed that "complete" could be seen as implying self-fulfillment, which remains "unexplained" given that it is difficult to determine what it is that precisely provides one with fulfillment. The use of the colon at the end of the fifth stanza for them suggested the idea that "completion" is something one achieves once a sense of perspective is attained. This perspective enables the individual to identify the "inexactnesses" in one's life, these denoting the shortage in all of those things (e.g., beauty, happiness, wealth, job satisfaction) that are supposedly meant to make one feel self-fulfilled. At the same time, these "inexactnesses" are what push the individual to climb the mountain in search of "the view," something achieved "at last" after considerable effort. One student claimed that the poem "refers to the fact that we are all flawed in some way, and our flaws are the things that push us to become better people."

The students claimed that once at the top of the mountain, the individual can "Recognize" what was once familiar and yet had become unknown. This verb for them implied the idea of coming to terms with one's identity, especially given its "unique" nature. Just as a person can become alienated from "home" and rediscover it once a sense of distance is sought, so can the individual recognize one's identity through an attempt to gain perspective on one's life and self. The students indicated that the adjective "solitary" evokes the notion that despite an individual's personal and social connections, the complex tapestry of thoughts, sensations, and emotions that shape one's identity every second of the day is experienced alone. One of the students remarked that "through the journey the speaker is reminded that self-actualization is important because one has to learn to live on his or her own. However, it is not something you learn immediately. Just as learning about another person's character is difficult, so is learning about who you are."

The students appreciated the value of Stevens's poem for a variety of reasons, a principal one being its self-reflexivity. They enjoyed reading it because it is "a poem about how a poem came into existence," and because "the existence of the poem is as solid as the mountain." One student commented, "this poem reminds me that literature always prevails

as it is permanent and will last even if someday the mountain might not." The other main reason why the majority of students enjoyed engaging with the poem was that they could relate to what they interpreted to be the speaker's struggle for self-fulfillment and perspective. According to one student, "just as the speaker recomposed the mountain by means of the poem, he can recompose his life by distancing himself from his usual routine so as to gain an outlook on his life and thus find happiness even without knowing fully why; where the sense of fulfillment, even though not fully understood, is felt." One of her classmates mentioned that "After reading the poem, I realized that I tend to get too caught up in my daily routine, rarely having time to push my boundaries and challenge myself. The poem inspired me to take back control of my life."

#### CONCLUSION

In the lesson described above, the students displayed a profound engagement with "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain." This was mostly due to the choice of text and partly due to the fact that I organized the lesson in a somewhat different manner from what usually took place in the poetry classroom. One of the challenges I sought to overcome by means of this lesson was that of my students being used to an approach whereby they were presented with an unseen poem and—after being led towards an explanation of what it might mean via inductive questioning—they were asked to critically write about it. The next challenge was that of extending their limited notions of poetry, and of how poetry produced meaning.

In the process of observing my students collaboratively engaging with Stevens's self-reflexive poem, I realized that their way of reading and discussing the text was not restricted to thematic meaning. Their analyses of the poem's aesthetic and linguistic features were facilitated by its self-reflexivity. The act of interpretation was not limited to a single layer of meaning, but students sought to focus on the effectiveness of Stevens's use of language and poetic devices. Their negotiation as to the readings made possible via the poet's crafting of language allowed them to transcend the traditional perspective they adopted when encountering an unseen poem. The self-reflexive nature of the poem enabled them to broaden their conceptualizations of poetry, and of how poetry generated meaning.

University of Malta  
Malta

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