

‘THE MOTHER TONGUE OF THE HUMAN RACE’: ENTRENCHED CONCEPTIONS OF POETRY AND THEIR RESONANCES IN ENGLISH EDUCATION

Daniel Xerri

Introduction

A range of philosophers and poets have written about poetry and in so doing have expressed their conceptions of this genre. Their statements about poetry ascribe to it the power of origins, as if poetry is the source of being and language. Such conceptions of poetry remain highly influential and help shape contemporary beliefs about poetry, especially in the educational sphere. They elevate poetry onto a pedestal and infuse it with cachet and this determines teachers’ and students’ approach to it in the classroom. This article traces such entrenched conceptions of poetry and examines how they influence beliefs and practices in relation to poetry in an educational environment.

Philosophy and Poetry

In *The Songlines*, Bruce Chatwin posits the idea that language originated as a song and that creation was sung into existence.¹ Indigenous Australians believe that during the Dreamtime creator-beings traversed the land and the sky, naming geographical and natural phenomena. Their paths formed songlines all over the continent, traversing huge distances, and cutting across different languages and cultures. Songs record these paths and by being sung in the correct sequence, the Indigenous people can navigate their way across the land. The fact that the song is made up of parts sung in different languages is not an obstacle to understanding given that rhythm is what carries meaning. Given its origins in the oral tradition, poetry is

often bestowed with the same creative power by a number of philosophers. For example, Johann Georg Hamann affirmed that 'Poetry is the mother tongue of the human race'² while Giambattista Vico claimed that 'The most sublime labour of poetry is to give sense and passion to insensate things'.³ For Martin Heidegger, 'Poetry proper is never merely a higher mode (*melos*) of everyday language. It is rather the reverse: everyday language is a forgotten and therefore used-up poem, from which there hardly resounds a call any longer'.⁴ Such statements about poetry confer it with the privilege of seemingly having helped to generate being and language. Partly due to this, poetry is seen as being akin to philosophy in its capacity to provide insights into the truth.

Poetry's ability to yield knowledge is celebrated by poets and philosophers alike. Samuel Taylor Coleridge believes that every great poet is at the same time a great philosopher⁵ while Philip Sidney considers poetry to be the most significant and original form of knowing, upon which both philosophy and history rely.⁶ According to the American philosopher Ralph Barton Perry, 'much actual poetry is far from philosophical',⁷ however, there are poets who can be termed philosopher-poets. Amongst these, Perry includes Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Dante and Omar Khayyam. He defines the philosopher-poet as someone 'who, having made the philosophical point of view his own, expresses himself in the form of poetry. The philosophical point of view is that from which the universe is comprehended in its totality'.⁸ For the philosopher-poet 'to be philosophical in intelligence, and yet essentially a poet, he must find his universal truth in immediate experience'.⁹ The difference between the philosopher-poet and the philosopher proper is that 'As the poet transcends thought for the sake of experience, the philosopher must transcend experience for the sake of thought'.¹⁰ Perry maintains that 'Poetry is another and more circumscribed means of restoring thought to life. By the poet's imagination, and through the art of his expression, thought may be sensuously perceived'.¹¹ This is in line with Hutchison's conviction that 'Poetry is unique among the arts, for the sensuous medium of poetry is language, the natural vehicle of thought. For this reason poetry is able to present ideas of greater complexity than can any other art, and of developing such ideas more fully'.¹² According to Dannhauser, 'poetry can teach us things beyond the reach of philosophy' and even if it 'is of equal worth to philosophy in teaching understandings it may be that poetry is ultimately of greater worth because reading it yields more pleasure'.¹³ The poet Charles Simic believes that 'The labor of poetry is finding ways through language to

point to what cannot be put into words'.¹⁴ Inspired by Heidegger's notion that it is not the poet who speaks through a poem but the text itself, Simic affirms that a 'poem's difficulty is that it presents an experience language cannot get at. Being cannot be represented or uttered...but only hinted at. Writing is always a rough translation from wordlessness into words'.¹⁵ For this reason, 'The poem is an attempt at self-recovery, self-recognition, self-remembering, the marvel of being again'.¹⁶ Similarly, Lepore and Stone assert that 'poetry exists because we are just as interested in discovering ourselves, and one another, in what we say. Poetry evokes a special kind of thinking – where we interpret ordinary links between language and world and mind as a kind of diagram of the possibilities of experience'.¹⁷ Many of the above pronouncements about poetry by both philosophers and poets infuse it with cachet and make it seem as if it is on a par to philosophy as a gateway to the truth. Such pronouncements have played a significant role in forging some of the most prominent conceptions of poetry operating in contemporary education.

Conceptions of Poetry in English Education

Research I have conducted in Malta, Australia, the United Kingdom and the USA seems to indicate that the way teachers and students think about poetry affects their approach to it in the classroom and their everyday lives. Their beliefs and attitudes in relation to poetry influence how much poetry they read, as well as why and how they read and study it.

The high school teachers, students and examiner who took part in my study in Malta seemed to share similar conceptions of poetry.¹⁸ For most students, poetry was a 'form of expression' intrinsically bound to the poet's thoughts and emotions and meant to evoke an emotive response in the reader. This seemingly echoed Romantic notions of poetry such as Wordsworth's idea that 'Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility'.¹⁹ It was also in line with Frost's idea that a poem has 'most important of all to reach the heart of the reader'.²⁰ For a number of students, poetry was a creative use of language crafted by someone possessing the talent to do so. The link between poetry and emotions led some students to perceive poetry as being a very personal artistic medium that was not always easy for the reader to understand. Similarly, the teachers' own difficulty in defining poetry was motivated by their understanding of poetry as something that eluded conceptualization. In this they seemed to agree with the examiner's

idea that the attempt to define poetry was defied by its 'opaque' quality. At the same time, they deemed poetry to be an inspired use of language that facilitated the expression of something deeply buried and which granted the reader access to emotional and cognitive insights. In this they seemed to believe in Shelley's idea that 'Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration'²¹ or else in Stevens's notion that 'Poets are the priests of the invisible'.²² The teachers and students shared the belief that poetry was an important genre that needed to be studied at school. This was mostly related to its capacity for personal growth and the development of 'insights' into life and the self. In this they seemed convinced of 'the effect that poetry can have on our perceptions, that is, on the way we see the world'.²³ Jollimore admits that this 'is one of the most powerful ways in which reading poetry can alter or even transform a person, and if poetry matters, I suspect, it matters largely because of its ability to accomplish this'.²⁴ Moreover, just like the examiner, the teachers and students expressed the belief that the study of poetry provided access to some kind of durable set of values that transcended transitory and frivolous concerns. Both teachers and students seemed to consider the poet to be in a privileged position and the reader's task to be that of gleaning the wisdom within poetry. The fact that most teachers and students were opposed to poetry writing in class, seemed to confirm that for them poetic expression was the preserve of a privileged few due to the belief that 'a poet is born not made' and that poetry was a product of talent and inspiration not training. This implied that the only poetry activity worthy of a classroom context was the analytical search for whatever truths the poet had hidden in the text. According to Dymoke, such conceptions of poetry have helped underscore its 'superiority over other forms of expression and [have] perhaps done the genre no favours by placing it on so high a pedestal'.²⁵ The study participants' mystification of poetry stopped it from being seen as something accessible and enjoyable.

The perceived difficulty of poetry led to opposite attitudes on the part of teachers and students. One of the reasons for which the teachers enjoyed teaching poetry was its challenging nature, this also being the reason for which they claimed not to read it for pleasure. This acted as a reminder of Nemerov's idea that 'There is a sort of reader who finds everything difficult if it happens to be written in verse... Such readers really have a very simple problem: they don't like poetry, even though some of them feel they ought to'.²⁶ The fact that students found poetry difficult made the teachers prize the analytical skills developed via literary criticism seminars,

skills seemingly employed to discover meaning in a poem. In fact, during half of the observed lessons teachers were noted encouraging students to look for a specific meaning in the text by means of an analytical approach. They seemingly disregarded the idea that 'the poetic...internalizes its dichotomies in advance, so that to speak of 'poetic language' is at once to stipulate a general condition of the signifiable, while at the same time evoking a fundamental aporia, paradox, or pleonasm'.²⁷ For the examiner, it was teachers' duty to emphasise poetry's difficulty, especially since students who were receptive to poetry were bound to enjoy the process of analysing a poem that eluded their efforts to understand it. In this, the examiner expressed an affinity with the poet Srikanth Reddy's admission that 'As a teacher of poetry, I try to encourage my students to cultivate a fascination with what's difficult about this art... I tell them, poetry isn't for wimps'.²⁸ However, Reddy also admits that 'the difficulty inherent to poetic expression is what makes this form of writing so marginal in our culture today'.²⁹ In fact, the analytical demands associated with the poetry read in literary criticism seminars dampened most of the interviewed students' enjoyment. The element of difficulty within poetry led students to rank the literary criticism component of poetry as being the most difficult one out of the nine components they did at school. This component was also the one they enjoyed the least. On the other hand, the set poetry text (Wilfred Owen's war poems) was a component that they enjoyed a lot and found relatively easy. One explanation for this apparent contradiction is that for the purposes of literary criticism students were expected to master the skills of reading and writing about poetry on their own whereas for the set text they were mostly expected to reproduce the knowledge provided to them by their teacher. Students' apparent apprehension with respect to literary criticism was due to the fact that in the examination they were going to be presented with an unseen poem that they needed to understand and write about in one hour. Not having a teacher to unravel the poem for them made them perceive the task as inordinately challenging.

Literary criticism made students think of poetry as a difficult genre consisting of a hidden meaning that they needed to uncover through analysis. Peskin found that when students 'read words in the shape of a poem it triggered the expectations and conventions that theorists hypothesize are associated with the poetic genre, as well as an aesthetic appreciation of how literary elements and stylistic devices amplify meaning'.³⁰ For the students in my study, meaning seemed to be the main characteristic of poetry and

it shaped their approach to it. In fact, those students who perceived some song lyrics as being comparable to poetry emphasized the significance of 'deep meaning' in rendering the lyrics poetic. Those students who did not consider lyrics to be a form of poetry insisted that this was because the latter had a 'deeper meaning' than the former. This was also mentioned in relation to the difference between writing lyrics and poetry. In the same vein, students' preference for reading poetry rather than listening to it was driven by the notion that it was only by reading and analyzing a poem that one could understand its 'true meaning.' Similarly, their teachers' preference for reading a poem rather than listening to it was because of their belief that poetry required intense concentration. Students thought of poetry's hidden meaning as some kind of message intentionally buried in the poem by its creator. Very few of them felt comfortable enough engaging in such analysis on their own, especially since they seemed convinced that their reading of the poem was never going to adequately expose its meaning. They seemed to conceive of poetry as made up of riddles to be solved. The prominence given to poetry's meaning seemed to almost eclipse anything else associated with poetry. The teachers seemed to be aware of this dilemma and claimed they discouraged students from adopting such a stance in relation to poetry, however, the lessons I observed demonstrated that the opposite tended to happen in literary criticism seminars based on poetry. In a sense these seminars were restrictive by not enabling students to do what Lamarque considers the mark of a poetically sensitive reader: 'To read poetry (of any kind) *as poetry* is to adopt a certain attitude of mind, a receptiveness, among other things, to finegrained expression, the salience of perspective, and the play of images'.³¹ The almost exclusive attention given to poetry's meaning encouraged a reductive view of the genre.

Many of the above beliefs about poetry also came to light in my research in contexts other than Malta. Some of these beliefs were influenced by entrenched conceptions of poetry found in the writings of philosophers and poets. When these conceptions restrict teachers' and students' engagement with poetry as a genre they can be said to be somewhat detrimental to the poetry experience.

Conclusion

My ongoing research in a number of educational contexts suggests that sometimes teachers and students share similar conceptions of poetry. The Romantic notion that poetry is the preserve of talented people who are

born with a gift for writing poetry extends itself to seeing the genre as a vehicle that is primarily used for the communication of thoughts and emotions. This cognitive and emotive association means that the participants consider poetry as being abstract in nature and difficult to define and understand. Poetry is deemed to be an inspired form of creativity made up of hidden meanings that once unearthed can provide the reader with some kind of wisdom, very much similar to Heaney's notion of poetry as divination³² or Hughes's conception of the poet as a shamanic figure engaging the reader in a magical ritual.³³ Partly for this reason, teachers and students value the study of poetry and reckon its place on the curriculum to be fully justified.

However, my research indicates that by mystifying poetry in this manner teachers and students are at the same time restricting their approach to the genre. By inflating poetry's cachet, they imbue it with ineffable qualities that can only be apprehended by means of the analytical exercise that is typically conducted in class and expected of students in an examination. This mystification of poetry leads teachers and students to perceive it as a difficult genre. Analysis is seemingly the only way in which this difficulty can be tackled. Both teachers and students give a lot of importance to this set of skills and consider them to be the main objective of a poetry lesson. My research suggests that due to this conception of difficulty, poetry in class is largely approached as a text that needs to be analysed for meaning even if this meaning might remain elusive. The main ramifications of these deeply entrenched beliefs about poetry are that the genre ends up being perceived as something bound to the classroom context and that any attempt to read a poem for personal pleasure is bound to be hindered by the challenge of having to unravel its meaning. Students, teachers and examiners inflate poetry with cachet but in the process its difficulty acts as a barrier to accessibility.

Given philosophy's role in shaping beliefs about poetry, the interplay between poetry and philosophy should be capitalized upon in order to broaden conceptions of poetry in English education. Lepore and Stone, for example, point out that philosophy is what allows us to think about how language works in poetic uses of language as distinct from more prosaic uses.³⁴ Philosophy's presence in teacher education and development should serve the purpose of broadening teachers' conceptions of poetry, enabling them to see it as a multimodal genre that can be read in multiple ways and not solely in order to extract hidden meaning from a canonical

poem for examination purposes. In this way they can influence their own students who most often share their beliefs about poetry and poetry pedagogy. Teachers' and students' beliefs about poetry should be revised in such a way that they come to see it as a democratic and inclusive genre, not just something produced by talented individuals who are 'born' poets. Teachers and students should be encouraged to see poetry as something that besides being read critically in class can also be read for pleasure. They should not consider poetry to be the preserve of published poets but should conceive of it as something capable of being written by teachers and young people. In thinking of poetry, teachers should emphasise its accessibility rather than its difficulty. They should be encouraged to challenge notions that help to mystify poetry and burden it with too much cachet. In this way they can allay students' anxiety in relation to poetry and help them to view it as enjoyable. Most importantly, this would enable teachers and students to become aware of the powerful influence exerted by their beliefs on the way they approach poetry. Recognizing the value of the interplay between poetry and philosophy might be crucial to teachers' and students' creative engagement with a poem's formal features, language, and multiple interpretations and associations.

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