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## **Teaching & Learning Guide for: New Directions for the Philosophy of Poetry**

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### *Author's Introduction*

Poetry has long been neglected in the field of philosophy of literature but recently there have been a number of important publications focused on poetry that represents renewed interest in this rich area of study. Of course, in any study of an artform, the first question to ask is what defines it. This guide therefore begins with the question, what is poetry? What makes it distinct from other forms of writing? One of the difficult issues with the definitional task is the need to distinguish poetry from prose whilst making sense of prose-poetry. Furthermore, identifying features that are standard, non-standard and contra standard is complicated due to the wide range of genres of poetry from haiku to epic to lyric. An answer to such a question may well require a separation of identifying genres from the poetic language they make use of.

Historically, there has been a keen interest in the value of poetry for its potential to offer truth and knowledge. In response to Plato's worry about the role of the poets in his republic, many scholars have discussed whether poetry is in fact at odds with the truth seeking project of philosophy. Responding to this challenge, many have uncovered a problem with the question of what a poem does and how a poem means. It turns out this is the more significant issue for poetry's role in philosophical inquiry. Poetry seems to resist singular meaning and cannot be reduced to a paraphrase. Instead, poetry appears to invite a kind of engagement with the reader/audience, which allows them to contribute to meaning-making.

Poets and philosophers have both looked to the emotions as a way of understanding the function of poetry. If it resists singular meaning, then what seems to unify the work and the experience it affords is the emotional expression it conveys. In thinking about poetry and emotion there are two points of focus, what the poet is trying to express through her words and what the reader feels in response to reading or hearing the work. Those writing about poetry and emotion tend to focus on one or the other rather than considering the poet in relation to the reader.

However, a study of emotion in poetry is incomplete without consideration of affect. This leads to one of the most interesting areas in the study of poetry, the performed poem and performance poetry. Despite poetry's origins as an oral artform, discussions of poetry have almost exclusively focused on page poetry but much can be learnt by extending poetry into the performance space. Not least because this is an important

context for understanding sign-language poetry, which brings into focus the importance of the body in poetry.

In this teaching and learning guide, I outline five topics that could be incorporated into a course on the philosophy of art and literature. These topics together will help students to get a sense of why poetry is such a rich and puzzling area of study. In order to help engagement, I have suggested some works of poetry to read alongside the philosophical literature. For further poetic examples, I have listed a number of online sources of poetry, including digital archives of poets reading their own work and recordings of performances.

### *Author Recommends:*

**Bradley, A C. (1963). Poetry for Poetry's Sake. In Oxford Lectures on Poetry. London: Macmillan.**  
Seminal essay on the nature and value of poetry.

**Ribeiro, A.C. (2016). Poetry. In N. Carroll and J. Gibson (eds) The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature (pp. 97-106). New York and London: Routledge**  
A good general introduction to the sub-field of the philosophy of poetry. Ribeiro is also one of the most important voices in the sub-field, who addresses fundamental questions regarding the definition, origins and ontology of poetry.

**French, P. A., H. K. Wettstein and E. LePore (eds.) (2009). Philosophy and Poetry: Midwest Studies in Philosophy 33. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.**  
A useful collection of essays that marked a return to poetry. Important contributions from Peter Lamarque, Angela Leighton, Elisabeth Camp and Troy Jollimore. This special issue brings together questions on the nature of metaphor, the relationship between poetry and thought, and the question of what and how poems mean.

**Gibson, J. (2015). Introduction: The Place of Poetry in Contemporary Aesthetics. In The Philosophy of Poetry (pp. 1-16). Oxford: Oxford University Press.**  
This collection of essays brings together philosopher's who have focused on poetry previously, including Anna Christina Ribeiro, Peter Lamarque and Ernst Laporte, as well as those who apply problems from other areas of philosophy to poetry, including Sherri Irvin, Simon Blackburn, Jesse Prinz and Ronald de Sousa. Gibson's introduction sets out the motivation for a turn to poetry and the key theoretical considerations.

**Constantine, D. (2013). Poetry: The Literary Agenda. Oxford: Oxford University Press.**  
It's important when investigating a particular art form that the practitioner's point of view is taken seriously, for who knows what poetry is and does better than those who live poetry. Poet, author, translator and critic, David Constantine, offers a detailed and insightful analysis of the nature and value of poetry.

**Pinsky, R. (1998) The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux inc.**  
USA poet, Robert Pinsky offers an account of the nature of poetry as deeply embodied, in the writing, performing and reading of poetry.

**Halliwell, S. (2010). Ancient Beginnings. In G. Hagberg and W. Jost (eds) A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature (pp. 3-12). MA, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.**  
This article provides an excellent historical overview of the arguments regarding poetry and philosophy.

### *Online Materials:*

There are a number of online poetry archives that not only include the text of the poem but in some cases audio files of poets reading their own work and videos of their performance.

**1. National Poetry Library (UK)**

<https://www.nationalpoetrylibrary.org.uk/online-poetry>

This digital archive contains an extensive collection of poems. The website also includes a quote-finding service. There are many highlights including an original pamphlet by Louis Zukofsky from 1966, video of Rachel Nwokoro performing 'Green Tea in the Wheelhouse' and audio recordings from some of the best in contemporary UK poetry including Momtaza Mehri, Jason Sam-La Rose, Vahni Capildeo and Raymond Antrobus.

**2. Poetry Foundation (USA)**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>

Digital archive of poetry, podcasts and information about poets that covers a number of traditions including romantic, beat, confessional and language poetry. There is an extensive selection of podcasts of discussions of works of poetry and you can hear poets reading their work aloud. See for example, Sumita Chakrabroty talking about her poem "Dear, beloved." The website also includes thematic collections e.g. poetry and the environment and poems of hope and resilience.

**3. Modern Poetry in Translation**

<https://modernpoetryintranslation.com/>

This website for poetry magazine *Modern Poetry in Translation* (established by Ted Hughes and Daniel Weissbort) offers an excellent introduction to world poetry through poems, essays and reviews. Alongside an archive of poems published in MPT, there are also audio clips of poetry readings.

**4. Poetry Archive (UK)**

<https://www.poetryarchive.org/>

Includes page poetry, with recordings of poets reading their own work as well as videos of performance poetry including Patience Agbabi and videos of interviews with leading poets in contemporary culture.

**5. Academy of American Poets (USA)**

<https://www.poets.org/>

An online collection of over 10,000 poems by US poets alongside biographical information. Discover more in contemporary poetry through their 'poem-a-day' e-service.

*Sample Syllabus:*

The following syllabus is intended to be included in a broader course focusing on the philosophy of literature, where focus on poetry and the specific questions it raises will enhance student understanding and discussions of literature as a whole. Alongside readings, I have also suggested works of poetry that will help spark discussion in the classroom.

**Week I: Introduction**

*What is Poetry?*

Poems:

Word hoards masterpieces of concrete poetry – in pictures. (7th April 2017). The Guardian. Online gallery available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2017/apr/07/masterpieces-concrete-poetry-pictures-getty-center-ian-hamilton-finlay-augusto-campos>

McGrath C. (2003). The Prose Poem. In *No Boundaries: Prose Poems by 24 American Poets*, edited by Ray Gonzalez. Available online: <https://poets.org/poem/prose-poem>

Reading:

Pierce, Robert B. (2003). Defining 'poetry'. *Philosophy and Literature* 27 (1): 151-163.

Ribeiro, A. C. (2007). Intending to repeat: A definition of poetry." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65 (2): 189–201.

Ribeiro, A. C. (2009). Toward a Philosophy of Poetry. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33: 61-77.

Simecek, K. and V. Ellis (2017). The Uses of Poetry: Renewing an Educational Understanding of a Language Art. *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 51 (1): 98-114.

## **Week II: Philosophical and Poetic thought**

*Can we gain philosophical insights through poetry?*

Poems:

Gray, Robert. 2006. The Drift of Things. In *Nameless Earth*. Manchester: Carcanet.

Lucretius (2008) *The Nature of Things* (De Rerum Natura). Translated by David R. Slavitt. London: University of California Press

Reading:

Eldridge, R. (2010). Truth in Poetry: Particulars and Universals. In G. Hagberg and W. Jost (eds.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature* (pp. 385-398). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Jarvis, S. (2012). Bedlam or Parnassus: The Verse Idea. *Metaphilosophy* 43 (1-2): 71-81.

John, E. (2013). Poetry and Directions for Thought. *Philosophy and Literature* 37 (2), 451-471.

Koethe, J. (2001). Thought and Poetry. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 25 (1): 5-11.

Koethe, J. (2009). Poetry and Truth. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33 (1): 53-60.

Lamarque, P. (2009). Poetry and Abstract Thought. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33 (1): 37-52.

Rowe, M. W. (1996). Poetry and Abstraction. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1): 1-15.

Walton, K. (2015). Thoughtwriting – in poetry and music. In *In Other Shoes: Music, Metaphor, Empathy, Existence* (pp. 54-74). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## **Week III: Poetry and the Elusiveness of Meaning**

*How ought we interpret works of poetry?*

Poems:

Mengert, C. (2000), It was, as they say, a threaded body. *Transmission* (issue 2), Castagraf. Available online: <http://castagraf.net/pdf/issue2.pdf>

Morgan, E. (1990) The Computer's First Christmas Card. In *Collected Poems* (Manchester, Carcanet). Also available online: <https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/computers-first-christmas-card/>

Reading:

Camp, E. (2009). Two Varieties of Literary Imagination: Metaphor, Fiction, and Thought Experiments. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33: 107–130.

de Gaynesford, M. (2011). How Not To Do Things With Words: J. L. Austin on Poetry. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 51 (1): 31-49.

Gibson, J. (2011). The Question of Poetic Meaning. *Nonsite* 4. Available online:

<http://nonsite.org/article/the-question-of-poetic-meaning>

Irvin, S. (2015). Unreadable Poems and How they Mean. In J. Gibson (ed.) *The Philosophy of Poetry* (pp. 88-110). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Jollimore, T. (2009). "Like a picture or a Bump on the head": Vision, cognition, and the language of poetry. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33: 131–158.
- Lamarque, P. (2009). The Elusiveness of Poetic Meaning. *Ratio* 22 (4): 398-420.
- Leighton, A. (2009). About about: On Poetry and Paraphrase. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33 (1): 167-176.
- McGregor, R. (2014). Poetic Thickness. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 54 (1): 49-64.

#### **Week IV: Poetry and Emotion**

*What is the relationship between poetry and emotion?*

Poems:

- McGuckian, Medbh (1982) 'The Butterfly Farm', in *The Flower Master*. Oldcastle: The Gallery Press.
- Rankine, Claudia. 2014. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press.
- Thomas, Dylan (1952) Do not go Gentle into that Good Night. Available online:  
<https://poets.org/poem/do-not-go-gentle-good-night>

Reading:

- Ribeiro, A. C. (2013). Heavenly Hurt: The Joy and Value of Sad Poetry. In J. Levinson (ed.) *Suffering Art Gladly: The Paradox of Negative Emotions in Art* (pp. 186-206). Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Simecek, K. (forthcoming). Cultivating Intimacy: the use of the second person in lyric poetry. *Philosophy and Literature* 43 (2)
- Simecek, K. (2015) Beyond Narrative: Poetry, Emotion and the Perspectival View. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55 (4): 497-513.
- Stecker, R. (2001). Expressiveness and Expression in Music and Poetry. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59 (1): 85-96.
- Wordsworth, W. (1802) 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems*. London: T.N. Longman and O. Rees.

#### **Week V: Performance and Embodiment: spoken word and sign-language poetry**

*What role does the body play in understanding and appreciating poetry?*

Poems:

- Scott, Paul (2009) Tree. Performed at the Arnolfini Arts Centre in Bristol, UK. Available at:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lf92PlzMAXo>
- Zephaniah, Benjamin (2016). Rong Radio Station. Available at:  
<http://poetrysociety.wpengine.com/education/page-fright/benjamin-zephaniah/rong-radio-station/>

Reading:

- Hill, L. (forthcoming). On the Persistence of Hedgehogs. In R. Ghosh (ed.) *Philosophy and Poetry: A Continental Perspective*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Pinsky, R. (1998) *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux inc.
- Ribeiro, A.C. (2015). The Spoken and the Written: An Ontology of Poems. In J. Gibson (ed.) *The Philosophy of Poetry* (pp. 127-148). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sutton-Spence, R. and M. Kaneko. (2007). Symmetry in Sign Language Poetry. *Sign Language Studies*, 7 (3): 284-318.

#### **Focus Questions:**

1. To what extent is poetic insight a form of philosophical knowledge?
2. What kind of thing is a poem? Should poetry be understood as a text or an event?
3. In what sense does poetry 'resist' meaning and interpretation?
4. In understanding and appreciating poetry, what are the demands of readers and audiences of poetry?
5. To what extent is performance space relevant to understanding the nature and value of poetry?

*Seminar/Project idea:*

In studying the philosophy of poetry, it is essential to be thinking about the philosophical literature with reference to particular case studies. For each topic listed above, I have indicated poems that can be read alongside the philosophical literature (in some cases, the works listed are directly discussed in the suggested readings, in other cases they serve as useful examples to apply to the readings). You may want to invite students to read and discuss the poems before in relation to the topic before introducing the theoretical literature. This approach will help students to be positioned to critically engage with the philosophical literature and use the poetic examples as test cases for their own experiences of engaging with poetry.

For instance, for week 1, you may wish to present examples of concrete poetry and ask students to reflect on what they take to be the standard features of poetry and to reflect on whether such works ought to count as paradigm cases of poetry. Then introduce an example of a prose poem, such as Campbell McGrath's 'The Prose Poem' and repeat the exercise and ask them to reflect on the similarities between concrete poetry and prose poetry. This will serve as a foundation for student's intuitions on what makes a poem a poem. At this stage, the following questions can be asked: To what extent is Ribiero's definition of poetry able to make sense of these kinds of poetic works? Can her definition explain why such works (concrete and prose poetry) count as hard cases?