Editorial: The Uses of Poetry

What is the value of poetry for learning and development and what are its uses in education today? What role can the poem play not only in formal education, but also in personal development and wellbeing beyond the classroom? How might we develop our teaching practices to access such benefits? These are all important questions to address if poetry is to continue to form a central part of the teaching of English literature in our schools and universities. However, the value of poetry in learning and development is often taken for granted: assumptions about the necessity of formative encounters with 'great' literature overlap with anecdotal evidence about the transformative power of stories. Consider the following statements about the value of poetry and its use:

> From *Teaching poetry in the secondary school: an HMI view*, Department for
> Education and Science, HMSO, 1987 [quoted in Ofsted 2007, 6]:
> Poetry matters because it is a central example of the use human beings make of
> words to explore and understand. Like other forms of writing we value, it lends
> shape and meaning to our experiences and helps us to move confidently in the
> world we know and then to step beyond it.

> Poet Meena Alexander (2013) on the use of poetry:
> Poetry's task is to reconcile us to the world—not to accept it at face value or to
> assent to things that are wrong, but to reconcile one in a larger sense, to return us in
> love, the province of the imagination, to the scope of our mortal lives.

In both cases, there is an appeal to the significant role poetry can play in our lives, yet in neither case is there indication of *how* poetry is able to offer such benefits. If we are to make the case for poetry's role in education, we must address the issue of how we can measure such benefits and why they are particular to poetry rather than other artforms.

Part of the problem is that arguments relating to the importance of teaching poetry are often drawn together with arguments that relate to the importance of teaching literature more generally, without making the case for what is distinctive about poetry.[1] Take for instance, Fecho et al., who argue that the central aim of teaching poetry is to expand understanding of self and society: 'teachers in English classrooms [should] situate the reading and creation of texts as ways of making meaning, as processes through which we develop existential sense of ourselves as actors in larger social worlds' (Fecho et al. 2007, 34). Although they highlight something of immense value in the study of poetry, they use this as the basis for a generalisation about the value of literature without articulating what it is about poetry in particular that can serve such function in learning and development.

Failing to make the case for poetry in the curriculum as a distinct artform risks a reduction in the degree and range of poetry students encounter through education. It is widely reported that a large number of primary and secondary teachers are not comfortable teaching poetry and prefer to teach other forms of literature (see Cremin et al. 2008; Benton 1999); without a clear argument for the inclusion of poetry, there is a real concern that poetry could lose its place in the study of literature in schools (Dymoke 2001; Dymoke 2012; Dymoke 2015; Xerri 2014). This point is suggested by one of the key findings of the 2007 Ofsted report, 'Poetry in Schools': 'Many teachers, especially in the primary schools visited, did not know enough about poetry and this was reflected in the limited range of poems studied' (Ofsted 2007, 4).

Where there has been a focus on the distinctiveness of poetry, this is often used as an argument for using poetry as a tool for language development and improving literacy skills, rather than making the case for why poetry *qua* poetry ought to form a valuable part of the curriculum. Over the last decade, poetry education in primary

schools has been heavily influenced by the literacy agenda, emphasising knowledge of

language techniques, textual forms and generic structures (Department for Education

2006). Poetry can therefore be seen as a tool in helping students identify features of

language:

> Poetry gives teachers an authentic text in which to work on phonics,
> phonemic awareness, and language development skills such as rhyme, word
> families, and alliteration ... Poems provide a simpler context for students to
> practice these skills, using text that is at their interest and academic levels'
> (Stickling et al. 2011, 32; see also Benton 1999, 527).[2]

Although poetry can have such value as part of improving literacy skills and language

development, the worry is that the other potential benefits are overlooked, which

impacts on the way in which poems are used in the classroom. For instance, the 2007

Ofsted report comments that poetry is sometimes used 'primarily [as] a teaching tool for

language development rather than a medium for exploring experience' (Ofsted 2007, 9).

In contrast to the educational domain, therapeutic uses of poetry tend to focus on

the importance of poetry in personal development, understanding the self and its

capacity for self-expression, usually through the creation of new poetry (Olson-McBride

and Page 2012; Jocson 2006) and bibliotherapy (Mazza 2008). There are reports of

beneficial uses of poetry *qua* poetry in psychological and therapeutic settings from

dementia, depression and schizophrenia treatment to prisons and caring for the elderly,

where the emphasis is on 'exploring experience' through reading poetry (Billington,

Davis and Farrington 2013; Kidd et al. 2011; Gregory 2011; Reiter 2010; Heimes 2011;

Shafi 2010). For example, Billington and Robinson reflect on the use of poems in

reading groups for women prisoners, which created strong personal resonances for the

group. They comment that after Henry Davies's poem 'Leisure' was read aloud to the group,

> [it] elicited some really quite moving talk about 'prison time' and using its space to think. One reader talked about a bunch of flowers and how she looked at them with a focus and concentration here that she had never done outside prison. Another reminisced about the 'time to stop and stare' her father had had, and sounded a note of regret that she has not always done this. She also looked forward to an imagined future where she could take more time. (Billington and Robinson 2013, 20)

Such examples suggest that the experience of poetry can offer crucial 'thinking spaces' in which to reflect on our lives, thereby enhancing understanding of the self through personal engagement with a poem.

One of the main aims of this special issue is to bring together hitherto unconnected approaches to the study of poetry's role in different stages of lifelong learning by those working in different disciplines in order to provide clearer evidence about poetry's educational value, and its roles at different stages of personal development. This special issue, therefore, presents cutting-edge interdisciplinary research on poetry and its uses by experts in education, literary studies, psychology, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and actor training in an attempt to start to weave together the potential benefits of engaging with poetry identified by these different disciplines to inform approaches to teaching poetry.

The original research presented in this special issue collectively argues that poetry has a distinctive value compared with other cultural objects and experiences, not least because of its ability to connect people's cognitive and affective responses, mind and body, experiences and memories. Importantly, we demonstrate that the value of people's encounters with poetry can be enhanced by modes of delivery that encourage

multiple modes of engagement: through the written word, the heard voice and bodily movement.

The core of this collection of essays arises out of an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project, 'The Uses of Poetry' (2013-14), led by Kate Rumbold,[3] that brought together evidence and expertise from a team of eminent and emerging scholars on the uses and values of poetry at different stages of life in order to develop new, interdisciplinary ways of understanding, articulating and quantifying the values of poetry. This special issue also draws together some important related projects from the UK, such as the University of Cambridge 'Poetry and Memory' project led by David Whitley and Debbie Pullinger, and Philip Davis and Josie Billington's work at the Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society (CRILS), University of Liverpool, in conjunction with the Liverpool-based charity The Reader Organisation.

Dominant themes that emerge from bringing these articles together include the way in which a focus on memorisation of poetry can reveal insight into the nature of memory, the contribution poetry can make to our well-being, as well as the importance of focusing on both the affective and cognitive dimensions of our engagement with poetry to enhance both appreciation of the work and personal development, all of which have great implications for approaches to teaching poetry in order to cultivate such value.

The issue opens with David Whitley and Debbie Pullinger's 'Beyond measure: the value of the memorised poem'. The article presents the results of a recent survey conducted as part of their 'Poetry and Memory' project, which sought to investigate the role memorisation of poetry can play in internalising poetry and helping individuals to connect with poems on a personal level. In their thought-provoking article, Whitley and Pullinger seek to understand the relationship between memorisation and literary

analysis, arguing that the memorised poem can be a source of meaning for the individual to accompany them at different stages in life.

Looking more directly at the role of poetry in education, Jacquelyn Bessell and Patricia Riddell focus on the memorisation process itself. In their article, 'Embodiment and Performance', they present a small-scale study, which investigated the role of bodily movement in the memorisation of poetry; whether performing physical actions in learning the lines of a poem aid recall of those lines. They discuss the results of this study in relation to embodied cognition, which suggests that an embodied approach to engaging with poetry can heighten the internalising of the poem, and thus the ability to accurately recite the work.

Following on from this and taking up the issue of the importance of personal and emotional responses to poetry, Kate Rumbold and Karen Simecek argue in 'Affective and cognitive responses to poetry in the university classroom', that there is a need to cultivate greater affective response in teaching poetry in the classroom. They introduce recent work in psychology to make the case that affective engagement can lead to cognitive rewards that could not be achieved by taking a purely analytic approach to the poem, and therefore there is a need to rebalance cognitive and affective engagement with poetry in the classroom. They also discuss some of the barriers to taking such affective orientated approaches to teaching poetry in which they draw on observations from a recent small-scale study.

In their ' Actual Texts, Possible Meanings: The Uses of Poetry and the Subjunctification of Experience,' Andrew Green, Viv Ellis and Karen Simecek discuss how they recreated Jerome Bruner's classic experiment exploring the differences in experience of hearing different forms of text read aloud. In the original experiment, Bruner compared a transactional text with a literary text, noting that hearers were more

likely to use complex, 'subjunctifying' language in reporting what they heard after listening to the literary text read aloud. In their version of the experiment, Green, Ellis and Simecek add in a further layer by considering difference in experience of kinds of literary text, comparing the language used in reporting on hearing a news article, literary prose and a poem. Their findings suggest a heightened use of subjunctifying language in the case of hearing poetry, demonstrating that poetry holds an important place in our exploration of language and meaning.

Reflecting on recent work in neuroscience and research in philosophy on the nature of metaphor, Patricia Riddell explores the human need for creative use of language in her 'Metaphor, Analogy and the Brain' and the differences served by metaphor, simile and analogy. This article outlines the complex brain processes involved in processing figurative language, including the difference in how the brain processes metaphor and simile. Through her discussion, she argues for the evolutionary significance of these important aspects of language use and the educative value of repeated engagement with such complex forms of language in aiding 'conceptual expansion'.

With the final three articles, we turn to a more practical focus on the uses of poetry. In 'Becoming poetry teachers: studying poems through reading aloud', Gabrielle Cliff Hodges discusses challenges for the student-teacher in preparing to teach poetry. She argues that student-teachers are often least confident in teaching poetry and are uncertain of how best to engage their students with this particular literary form. Critical of the recent focus on recitation of poetry, which she argues promotes a solitary engagement with poetry, Cliff Hodges argues for the need for a more collaborative approach to engaging with poetry, through activities such as 'choral reading'. Reflecting

on her own teaching practice, she argues that the most effective way of engaging

student-teachers with poetry is through reading and exploring together.

Nicholas Bayley offers a practitioner's perspective of poetry, drawing on his

own personal experiences of the value of learning poetry by heart and how this has had

unexpected positive results in his psychoanalytic practice. He puts forward an insightful

argument for recognising the imagistic power of poetry and how this connects with our

individual perceptions of the world in which we live.

Finally, Philip Davis and Josie Billington provide a further exploration of how

poetry works for us - the mechanisms at work, again offering a vision of the therapeutic

benefits of reading poetry, in particular poetry as 'offering a place for thinking *about*

[life] without ceasing to be *in* it'. They suggest the importance of focusing on the

experience and value of reading prior to the kind of experience of poetry we have once

we have learnt about the poetic structure more formally. By considering this in the

context of education, there might be an important role for teachers to play in offering

students the space to encounter and value poetry in this pre-theoretical way. There is an

immensely powerful experience on offer from a first encounter, further supporting the

call to take more care in attending to the rich affective dimensions of our experience of

poetry for its cognitive, emotional and social benefits.

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[1] There are some notable exceptions to this, see for instance Dymoke et al (2015), Pullinger (2012) and Simecek and Ellis (2017)

[2] For a good discussion of two historic models of using poetry to enhance literacy skills, Geisel's *The Cat in the Hat* series and Kenneth Koch's *Teaching children to write poetry*, see Bramberger (2015); see also Rasinski (2014).

[3] Other project members included Viv Ellis (Education, KCL), Patricia Riddell (Psychology, University of Reading), Karen Simecek (Philosophy, University of Warwick), Abigail Williams (English Literature, University of Oxford), Clare Rathbone (Psychology, Oxford Brookes) and Emma Howells (Poet and creative writing teacher). The full report from the project is available at:

https://usesofpoetry.files.wordpress.com/2015/12/ahrc_cultural_value_rda-uses-of-poetry-rumbold.pdf