Editorial

Poetry in Literary Education

Tzina Kalogirou. National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

Juan Senís Fernández. Universidad de Zaragoza, Spain

Xavier Mínguez-López. Universitat de València, Spain

> Poetry looks like a game and is not: a game does indeed bring men together but in such a way that each forgets himself in the process. In poetry on the other hand man is reunited on the foundation of his existence. There he comes to rest; not indeed to the seeming rest of inactivity and emptiness of thought, but to that infinite state of rest in which all powers and relations are active.
>
> Martin Heidegger (1949)

What is poetry? The definitions are countless. As many as the people in this world. It might be argued that the most decisive aspect of poetry is its resistance to be defined, labeled, or pinned down. We all know how poetry sounds and feels, and we can recognize a poem when we hear, recite or read one. However, it may be difficult for us to explain, or offer a detailed account of what exactly *is* poetry and what its meaning might be, its effect, or significance in our lives. Very often, poetry is defined as a special kind of language which does innovative things with words, sound, rhythm and pattern; features which consist a constant source of our pleasure and understanding of the poem. We may even understand a poem not only by feeling its rhythms but also by hearing its sounds as well as by grasping its clusters of meanings, yet we may not be able to express our understanding of it to others. Poems have various and different effects on

us. Some seem very compelling, perplexed, or even obscure, prompting great chains of thought when we seek to communicate with them. Others have such a mesmerizing effect that we just want to keep listening to them and to let ourselves be absorbed into the satisfying, sensual experience they have to offer (Kalogirou, 2019, pp. 82-83; Williams, 2009). Children's poetry, more specifically, has recently been defined as a multimodal art which is "shaped by the dynamics of orality and textuality and by the interplay between them" (Pullinger, 2017, p. 231). Combining strong prosodic-acoustic elements with vivid imagery and fanciful content, children's poetry offers an inescapable sensory, imaginative, and emotional experience to the child from the very first years of their life. Chukovsky (1966) has famously observed how the language of pre-school children is actually enriched by poetry. He carefully noted down children's natural inventiveness and playful manipulation of language as a manifestation of their natural towards poetry. The 'appetite for poetry' (to quote Frank Kermode, 1989) develops early in life and supposedly is everlasting, not ready to disappear with adulthood.

It is commonly accepted that children have actually plenty of opportunities to engage in poetic discourse and creative wordplay even before their first poetry lesson. Poetry escapes the classroom just as it escapes a definition; it can be traced back to and enjoyed in environments other than a school classroom and far away from the teacher's influence: out in the streets and on the screen, at the playground and the Underground (see for instance, *Poems on the Underground* editorial series), and all in all in various social venues where it slams and beats. Chants, songs and lullabies are infused with poetry which is found almost everywhere in life. However, inside the school classroom, poetry is often treated more as a duty or a 'difficult' school subject, rather than a delight, which causes feelings of disquiet and worry: what is supposedly 'right' or 'wrong', regarding both a poem's interpretation as well as our teaching approaches to it. In Michael Benton's words (1992, p. 83), poetry has always had bad luck in Education and it is probably the most badly taught or neglected school subject. In a similar framework, in his provocatively entitled poem "Introduction to Poetry", the American poet (and former poet laureate of the United States) Billy Collins (1988, p.58) expresses his disappointment regarding a common poetry didactic approach in the classroom, which is overtly reductive and explicating.

> I ask them to take a poem
> and hold it up to the light
> like a color slide
>
> or press an ear against its hive.
>
> I say drop a mouse into a poem
> and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

Are we doomed to destroy poetry every time we teach it? The answer is definitely 'no' to this question; we do not particularly believe that this is actually the problem. As teachers we can – and we usually try to – avoid the explication of the poem in teaching, however, Billy Collins has captured a tension at the core of poetry teaching: to teach a poem without overanalyzing it or academically "dissecting" it while simultaneously focusing upon its polysemic nature; also, to communicate in teaching the tangible aesthetic impact of the poem to the emotional and mental state of the reader (Wakely-Mulroney and Joy, 2018). Collins' poem reveals many teachers'/students' tendency to limit a poem's reading to searching of a meaning whereas a poem is not only a great deal more than that but also has to offer so much more than a set of itemized ideas; it is a powerful and concrete unit of content and significant form. It is associated with sound and music, and the intricate use of a distinctive language in order to convey its meanings. Maybe it is a truism in poetry criticism, and yet it might be true that the 'how' of poetry is not to be converted too easily into a 'what'– theme wise or message wise. A sense of awareness of its formal qualities is a sine qua non for an effective reading of poetry.

While many students enjoy poetry in their own time, they do not consider it as an engaging or personally satisfying school subject. Very often, they see poetry reading only in the context of correctly answering questions after the text's ending, and not as an activity entailing wonder, curiosity, and commitment to search for unconventional meanings through language and form. It is of crucial importance for students to become more confident whenever and wherever they come across a poem and more flexible to explore the imaginative pathways it opens up for them. It is also important for them to acknowledge that poetry can convey more than what ordinary words express, evoking what would be inexpressible otherwise.

Fostering a favorable-for-poetry environment is crucial in order for the poetry course to come to fruition. Maintaining the delights of poetry within the school context and during the students'

encounters with any given poetic text is also another important aspect of poetry teaching. All poetry (children's and adults'), is inherently associated with the pleasures of the body, the enlivenment of the senses, and the vital energy of oral and performative traditions. Its intriguing sonic–incantatory qualities, its intense verbal play and prosodic effects, and its vivid imagery allow for a poem's combined appeal to the senses as well as the intellect. Many teachers find essential for poetry teaching to create powerful links between poetry and popular culture; between poetry and music or songs; between poetry and oral tradition. To this end, they insist on broadening the school canon by teaching next to the long-established canonical poems, lyrics, songs, rhymes, ditties and folk songs, long-surviving in lore and oral tradition.

The active involvement of students in the process of learning is, nevertheless, an essential aspect of effective, student-centered teaching. Students take pleasure from interacting with others and they become increasingly comfortable with learning situations which are more open-ended and interdisciplinary. Poetry teaching which is organized around "grand conversations" (Peterson and Eeds, 1990), open, whole class discussions, and open-ended questions or activities, is usually more engaging for the students. The variety of teaching methods and activities is equally crucial in the process of learning. Thus, an emphasis on a range of creative, critical and interdisciplinary approaches to poetry enables teachers to teach with more enthusiasm and helps students to view poetry reading as a pleasurable embodied experience. Initiating, sustaining, and enhancing creative, critical and interdisciplinary links among students, teachers and poems is a central concern of poetry didactics. Constant, reciprocal interaction between poems and readers (either students or teachers) entails them to develop an increasing sensitivity to ideas, formal qualities, verbal gestures and other possibilities present in any poetic text. Inside the classroom, students should have opportunities to experience poetry in a variety of ways: by listening to poems, reading them silently and aloud, exploring, challenging and interpreting them, transforming them into something else, e.g. into another semiotic artwork, a poster, a video-clip or a comic strip for instance, etc. They should also be encouraged to perform and write their own poems – there is indeed a bulk of creative writing techniques for classroom use. Poetry should be approached and appreciated as a live, multimodal experience taking place in various and diverse social contexts. Although in primary and lower secondary grades the overall approach to poetry is a more playful and informal one, this doesn't necessarily mean that students cannot be motivated towards participating with the art and craft of poetry from early on. Acquiring a critical vocabulary on poetry and an ability to negotiate the 'foregrounded' (Mukařovsky, 1970) poetic language is a gradually growing competence which goes all the way back to school years.

In general, a balanced "creation plus critique' approach to poetry teaching may be proposed as ideal for almost every grade.

It is undoubtedly true that poetry embodies qualities which make it a unique and valuable experience for young readers. The act of reading poetry equals a participation in a realm of heighten experience through the living power of language and the act of envisioning the world via carefully chosen words. Teachers have not stopped searching for ways and practices which will enable them to enhance their students' experience as concerns poetry. In a similar vein, we do hope that this issue of JLE might serve as a contribution to the ongoing discussion and research about poetry teaching and its overall impact on Literary Education. It might also be considered an initiative for both students and educators to read, discuss and explore poetry inside the classroom, but simultaneously and reciprocally, to discover poetry in the context of life and society and enjoy it in a genuine, straightforward way. "Eat the poem" the poet Eve Merriam (How to eat a poem) suggests, instead of seeing it as a classroom captive tied to a chair.

> Don't be polite.
> Bite in.
> Pick it up with your fingers and lick the juice that
> may run down your chin.
> It is ready and ripe now, whenever you are.
> You do not need a knife or fork or spoon
> or plate or napkin or tablecloth.
>
> For there is no core
> or stem
> or rind
> or pit
> or seed
> or skin
> to throw away. (Merriam, 2006, p. 7).

Whilst we don't pretend that this issue covers the entire subject of poetry in Literary Education, however, it provides a focus regarding the professional conversation about the teaching of poetry and its integration in to Education. The contributors share ways and methods they have found conducive to the effective and pleasurable experience of poetry in the school context. They also address important aspects of poetry teaching identifying a broad educational agenda for poetry situated in different national, cultural and historical educational contexts (**Pedro Balaus Custodio,** "Jovens Leitores e Unm Soneto Portugués do Séc. XVIII: Ima Aliança Viável? Um Ensaio no 2º Ciclo do Ensino Basico", **Sotiria Kalasaridou,** "The History of C.P Cavafy in Greek Education: Landmarks and Gaps", **María Luisa Alonso,** "Non European Cultural Heritages in Poetry for Young People (in and out of school)"). Other contributions address poetry within an *inter-artistic/interdisciplinary* (**Marianna Toutziaraki**, "The Dialogic relationship between poems

and paintings and its application to Literary Education in High School"), *transmedial* (**Evangelia Moula and Konstantinos Malafantis,** "Homer's *Odyssey*: from Classical Poetry to Threshold Graphic Narrative for Dual Readership") or *transgressive* (**Maria Rosario de Neira**, "La reescritura creativa como forma de acercamiento a la literatura infantil y juvenil en la formación de maestros") theoretical framework. **Marita Paparousi** ('Teaching Lyric Poetry: An Approach through Genre") helps us understand that in poetry teaching so much can been gained if we focus not only on individual poets/poems' teaching but also on the teaching of *poetry* in a more general sense, while viewing it within the broader contexts of generic traditions and historical development. **Clementine Beauvais** ("An emergent sense of the literary: Doing children's poetry translation in the literature classroom") highlights literary translation as an important tool in literature classroom which helps students understand the rudiments of literary translation, and through practicing it, to get involved with important questions about poetic craft and increase their knowledge about the ways with which poetry operates.

The Miscellaneous section includes two articles. The first one, **Cristopher [Kit] Kellen** "Race and Nation in Ella Mc Fadyen's *Pegmen Tales*", is a smart essay about how these two concepts (race and nation) can be constructed through the metaphor of a group of pegmen. The second one by **Ian Cushing** ("Integrating Language and Literature. A Text World Theory Approach") offers insight to critical and integrational approaches to literary texts.

Having said that, we'd like to thank all the contributors for giving us their knowledge and expertise to make this issue happen. We also thank the reviewers for their meticulous work, and all those who worked so that this journal can count its second issue. Thank you all for helping poetry put a spell on JLE!

1. References

Benton, M. (1992). *Secondary Worlds. Literature Teaching and the Visual Arts*. Buckingham-Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Chukovsky, K. (1963). *From Two to Five*. Berkley, Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Collins, B. (1988). *The Apple that Astonished Paris*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press.

Heidegger, M. (1949). Hölderlin and the essence of poetry. In W. Brock (ed.) *Existence and being* (pp. 270-291). Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Co.

Kalogirou, T. (2019). Playful Encounters in the Garden of Poetry: Children's Poetry and Play, *Filoteknos*, *9*, 82-104. doi: 10.23817/filotek.9-8

Kermode, F. (1989). *An Appetite for Poetry*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Merriam, E. (2006), How to eat a poem. In Andrew Carroll et al. (Eds.), *How to Eat a Poem: A Smorgasbord of Tasty and Delicious Poems for Young Readers*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications.

Mukařovsky, J. (1970). Standard language and poetic language. In Donald C. Freeman (Ed.) *Linguistics and Literary Style* (pp. 40-56). New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Peterson, R. & Eds, M. (1990). *Grand Conversations. Literature Groups in Action.* New York: Scholastic.

Pullinger, D. (2017). *From Tongue to Text. A New Reading of Children's Poetry*. London and New York: Bloomsbury.

Wakely-Mulroney, K. & Joy, L. (2018). *The Aesthetics of Children's Poetry: A Study of Children's Verse in English*. Oxon and New York: Routledge.

Williams, R. (2009). *The Poetry Toolkit: The Essential Guide to Studying Poetry*. London and New York: Bloomsbury.

How to cite this paper: