

Poetry in the Time of Global Diversity

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Received 14 February 2015, received in revised from 11 April 2015, accepted 11 April 2015

Abstract: To ask why poetry is important is an urgent question concerned with creativity in education. Poetry helps in contextualizing the particular (experience) thereby constituting a crucial point of entry into the study of Humanities. It is the inability to accommodate lived experience that perhaps accounts for the dwindling interest in poetry. My Paper would, therefore, explore whether poetry leads to a macro understanding of Humanities. It would also be pertinent to examine if there is still an openness of ideas and purposes on which the discipline was born and whether there is still an insistence (in poetry) on the primacy of the individual's imagination. Such considerations have a significant bearing on the relevance of poetry in higher education vis-à-vis research, scholarship and teaching, especially in the wake of increasing corporatization and utilitarianism.

1. INTRODUCTION

To ask ourselves why poetry is important is an urgent question, at a difficult time, for anyone concerned with creativity in education. To know why poetry is important, we have to ask first why language is important. Language is the singlemost important possession of the human race. Conventionally, we believe that language is there to express our thinking. We could not think were it not for language. Language-less, we die. Roland Barthes wrote that any refusal of language is a death [1]. Language makes us human or, more accurately, it is the prerequisite for our humanity. And, poetry teaches so much for it is language at its most intense. Poetry goes to the centre of our language, and - by that token - to the centre of what it is to be a human being.

Poetry in the present day world is as vital as in the past. It is essential not only to the aesthetics but the very poetics of humanity. I believe in the integrity of poetry as a major art form and the importance of the poet's responsibility vis-à-vis the value of representation that words contain and express. Poetry is the poetics of life. It helps express one's lived experience and constitutes a crucial point of entry into the study of Humanities. In fact, the inability to accommodate lived experience is perhaps a marker of the failure of theory and the dwindling interest in poetry. In fact, Harold Bloom [2] and Terry Eagleton [3] both rue the near extinction of poetry). To thus approach poetry as a humanizing influence is to approach questions about mental and spiritual truths, about the self and about problematic relationships with the world.

My Paper, therefore, explores whether the genre of poetry - in

an age accustomed to (indeed, obsessed with) expressing oneself in the pursuit of emotional health and personal autonomy - leads to a macro understanding of the humanities. The humanities differ from other disciplines in subject-matter and methodology as they seek to contextualize the particular. Living as we are in an age of increased globalism and intellectual tyranny, it would also be pertinent to examine if there is still an openness of ideas and purposes on which the discipline (Humanities) was born. Also, is there still an insistence (in poetry) on the primacy of the individual and his/her imagination (i.e. the mind's eye)? These are important considerations and have a bearing on the relevance of poetry in higher education vis-à-vis research, scholarship and teaching in the times of increasing corporatization of institutional spaces such as the University and the utilitarian approach to knowledge. The basic philosophy of education has come under the scanner in the present academic environment and the materialism of our system; its emphasis on what pays rather than what teaches; its managerialism that looks at students in terms of what they must become, rather than what they are - all this has turned profoundly anti-poetic and, therefore, anti-creative.

Studying literature traditionally meant picking an academic department that reflects the nation state on a basically European model. English, French, and German programmes each focus on the canons of their respective national traditions. But literature and readers have both always ranged outside the boundaries of one national language. German literature, for instance, is brimming with the influences of English and French and Italian and Greek and Roman literature and so on. And even writers who knew nothing of one another may show fascinating similarities and differences; a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé and a poem by Emily Dickinson throw each other into startling relief encouraging us to cultivate reading across linguistic boundaries in order to highlight everything that the exclusive focus on a national literature tends to obscure.

The poetic territory, however, immediately presents problems because it comes with a specialized technical language. Marjorie Perloff [4] who has written numerous books on experimental and avant-garde modern and contemporary poetry, defines poetry in terms that are quite conventional and classical. Perloff believes that a poem differs from routine or normal discourse by being the art form that foregrounds

language, in its complexity, intensity, and, especially, 'relatedness' since in the poetic text everything is related to everything else – or should be. As a matter of fact, all literature – especially poetry with its music – is a pedagogic asset in studying the subtle and complex relationships between art and politics, aesthetics and ethics.

In the wake of increasing globalization and intellectual diversity, we need to begin to look at poetry for thought especially from the global south. Various partnerships and international research networks linking Higher Education Institutions in the global north and south have emerged in the past decades as an expression of higher education's contribution to international development and of the need to bridge the north/south knowledge divide. Such partnerships have contributed to enhanced human and infrastructural capacity, as well as to a better integration of the southern partners in international exchanges, and building networks to reach out to and learn from nontraditional constituencies such as technological developments and advancements in the form of internet technologies in a digital age.

Keeping in mind such diversity, and also in terms of the plural nature of the word, poems could be approached as autonomous aesthetic objects, as emotive expression, as faithful representation; in other words, poetry may be seen as a purposeful, creative activity after all. In fact, teaching poetry offers the literature instructor some of the most fundamental, immediate, active, even physical ways to engage students in learning. But, these days, poetry has been dislodged from the centre of the literary curriculum by fiction, drama, cultural studies, and even literary theory. Teachers lament that students find it difficult and intimidating. For example, it is possible that even good students arrive at college afraid of poetry, some because they think it a mystery into which they are not initiated and some because they take poems to be cryptic messages with nuggets of advice or belief. Stephen Regan [5] writes that debates over English and the national curriculum have ignored poetry as a distinct genre, so that while the poetry festivals flourish, some undergraduate students are likely to arrive at university with little or no interest in poetry, confessing that they do not know how to read it and therefore cannot be expected to understand or appreciate it. Many students do not like poetry very much, and particularly resist poetry that is difficult.

Yet many people commented on the spontaneous resurgence of poetry after September 11, 2001. The American Poet Laureate Billy Collins [6], for instance, says that in times of crisis, it is interesting that people do not turn to the novel, but always to poetry. The British Poet Laureate Andrew Motion [7] too opines that poetry is the form we turn to instinctively at moments of intensity, whether it be to celebrate or grieve. This is because of its compressions and distillations, its different perspectives, its meditative pace, its link with our strongest emotions, its power to console, its separation (of whatever degree) from ordinary speech which creates a sense of occasion, and because of its implicit demand to remember.

The qualities of compression, mnemonics, emotion, and consolation in poetry provide some directions about how it might be a paradigm for active, student-centred teaching in the university as well as primary and secondary education. Collins argues that teaching poetry offers some fundamental cognitive and intellectual skills, and that reading a poem replicates the way we learn and think. He sees many parallels between poetry and learning, and maintains that when we read a poem, we enter the consciousness of another. It requires that we loosen some of our fixed notions in order to accommodate another point of view. To follow the connections in a metaphor is to make a mental leap, to exercise an imaginative agility, even to open a new synapse as two disparate things are linked. The poetic form is thus a way of thinking, an angle of approach, which helps students understand how information must be shaped and contoured in order to be intelligible.

In education, there has been a shift in the last few decades from seeing creativity as an ability associated with the very gifted and most able, to something that we all possess to varying degrees and which can be encouraged, nurtured and developed. Creativity exists and operates on a continuum from inventions and interventions that change the world, through those that change a domain, to those that have local and personal significance: a sort of personal effectiveness in coping well with unknown territory and in recognizing and making choices. In higher education, we are primarily concerned with democratic notions of creativity. As educators, we must therefore recognize the continuum of creative ability and potential, and support not only everyday notions of creativity but also aspire to prepare people to take on challenges at the level of making a real difference to their chosen field of endeavour.

This could be attempted by trespassing across disciplinary boundaries to foster cross-disciplinary interactions thereby forging alliances between the humanities and the social sciences. The humanities have a different conception of truth, aiming at fullness and fidelity to human experience. By a twist of fate, science itself - through complexity theory, research in brain functioning, and in some aspects of linguistics - is now suggesting that poetry's view is not simply a viable alternative, but in some ways closer to how human beings actually function; that poetry is not an arbitrary, solipsist, individual creation, but a way of more fully understanding ourselves and the world around. I'll close with a couple of Matthew Arnold's observations made in "The Study of Poetry" that come to my mind all at once about how the future of poetry is "immense", how - in poetry - we will find "an ever surer and surer stay", how mankind will discover that "we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us" (260).

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