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Silence in the Philosophical Classroom: On Learning and Teaching Poetry

Neha Sen*

The professor walked into the classroom, picked up the chalk, and wrote down the words, "Cold Beer/ Sold here", on one side of the blackboard, and the following on the other:

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

Turning to the class, she asked us a simple question: which one of the two was poetry, and why so. The former elicited a quick response: of course, we scoffed, what William Carlos Williams had written was a poem, while the rhyming advertisement quip was clearly not. The professor's second question, however, stumped us a little. Answers cropping up from different parts of the classroom were all promptly dismissed one after the other. It was not a matter of length, it was not a matter of rhythm or rhyme, of content, or of context. The only

* Department of English and Cultural Studies, CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bengaluru, Karnataka, India – 560029; neha.sen@maeng.christuniversity.in

acceptable answer was perhaps, an inexplicable, almost instinctive distinction that all of us were very quick to make between these two groups of words. What makes a series of lines or sentences a poem is a question that has bothered most of us who have dabbled in the arts, and there seems to be no cohesive conclusion to this universal, timeless wonder.

If Plato wanted to banish all poets from his Republic, that was precisely because of his acute awareness of the emotional and psychological power of poetry on its readers. The moral and ethical value of poetry has been argued for by the likes of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Philip Sidney. To look at poetry from a banally utilitarian way, resistance and activism have found expression in poetry, and literature at large. The coin has the other side too: propaganda does not discriminate in its form, and poetry has been a tool inciting violence and hatred as well. Slavoj Žižek points out how there can be no ethnic cleansing, no genocide, without poetry in our post-ideological world, citing the instances from Russia to Yugoslavia to Isreal publishing 'revenge poetry' to fuel the war against Gaza. Amidst all of this, poetry has continued to be written, even after Auschwitz, against Theodore Adorno's dictum, and continues to be taught in classrooms and universities alike. With the proliferation of digital platforms and easily accessible online spaces, we are perhaps writing and reading more poetry than ever before. This democratisation has brought poetry reading, writing, and engagement to individuals who might not typically engage with more traditional forms.

Before the pedagogical and academic implications of poetry, both old and new, the primary text itself, poems, must be preliminarily examined, if only to establish and contextualise the interrogation of poetry in the classroom and beyond. The writing and reading of poems itself have been democratised, but it has brought with it a shift in the critique and criticism of poetry. Artistic merit and depth of the poetic thought found in not only online platforms but also in self-published collections has invited divided and varied responses. But a far more interesting evolution has also taken place: an evolution in the very form and modality of poetry, an evolution in the very question of what is poetry. Micro-poetry, characterized by its extreme brevity (Plummer, 2017), has gained

significant traction, perfectly suited to the fast-paced consumption habits on social media where attention is capital. Beyond these shorter forms, the digital age has catalysed the emergence of entirely new poetic expressions, often categorized as "born-digital" poetry (Strickland, 2009). It ceases to be words printed on paper, it moves beyond experimentations with rhyme, rhythm, and language. Hypertext poetry, for instance, employs hyperlinks to create non-linear reading experiences, allowing readers to navigate through interconnected nodes of text (Aiudi, 2018). Kinetic poetry incorporates movement and animation, adding a temporal and visual dimension to the poetic text ("Kinetic Poetry," 2021). If creation, construction, and engagement with poetry has changed so dramatically, then academic discourse around poetry must also follow suit.

A quick survey of existing literature on poetry education reveals brand new innovations, with technical and digital aids and immersive learning experiences. But this survey quickly reveals that most of these teaching methods are rare, elite, and exclusive. Not all classrooms are equipped with these technologies, not all instructors are trained to implement them, not all syllabi and curricula are made to accommodate them. What we are left with, realistically, is a group of learners who find poetic language far too removed from everyday language, and hence an esoteric genre that requires too much attention and excessive analysis or interpretation to grasp entirely. This stance is furthered by the ease with which fiction is introduced from an early age to readers most commonly in the form of prose. All of these factors foster a closer proximity and comfort with prose, one that is ultimately manifested in the involuntary leaning of future researchers to prose for their academic research instead of poetry, all leading to a wide disparity between the scholarly work being put out on poetry and prose.

Historically speaking, literary studies have often privileged prose, particularly the novel, as a primary object of analysis. The rise of New Criticism in the mid-20th century, with its emphasis on close reading of the text in isolation, inadvertently marginalized the historical and cultural contexts that often inform poetic meaning. While New Criticism focused on poetry, its formalist approach sometimes overlooked the broader pedagogical and societal

implications of engaging with verse. The emphasis on narrative as a dominant mode of understanding and representing experience in educational research may also be another contributing factor to this relative lack. Narrative inquiry, with its focus on stories and personal experiences, has gained significant traction in educational research. While poetry can certainly be used within narrative inquiry, its concise and often non-linear nature might not always align with the extended storytelling format that narrative research often favours. Additionally, the subjective and often ambiguous nature of poetry can present methodological challenges for researchers seeking quantifiable data and easily generalizable findings.

Personally speaking, our school and college education have rarely created an environment conducive to encourage reading, writing, and engagement with poetry on a level that instils aesthetic or academic interest in the subject. In early schooling, poetry was often treated as a peripheral subject, if not an outright intimidating one. Literature classes may have had equal numbers of poems and prose pieces in the syllabus, but when it came to personal readings for pleasure, most of ours and our peers' reading lists were dominated by novels and short stories. Moreover, creative writing assignments rarely ventured beyond prose, with poetry almost always being treated as a higher art with a science and precision required in its composition which we simpletons would never master or even attempt. Our brief encounters with roads that diverged into the figurative road we would never stumble upon and the lonely child mesmerised by a host of flowers we had never laid eyes on gave us little incentive to engage with poetry beyond what was required for evaluations in school.

Emphasis is always on interpretation: on dissecting, analysing, pulling apart, finding meaning. And while these become almost imperative for evaluating a student's engagement with the literary piece in school education, there was never any appreciation or affective engagement with poetry in our schools. There was a "correct" interpretation of poems for our classrooms and examination papers, and these interpretations were rarely inspirational or resonating. University, while offering more specialised literary studies, did not fundamentally shift this experience. Already existing discourse in literary circles and

theoretical frameworks took precedence over the texts in college classrooms as well, and once again, the poem itself was pushed to obscurity with academic or research-oriented methods and methodologies taking the foreground. If anything piqued our interest in papers dealing specifically with poetry, it became the context: the historical, social, and political situations which led to the composition and reception of the poems prescribed in the syllabus brought the figures of the poets alive for the first time. Details of literary feuds and political resistance and personal tribulations breathed life into the figures of the poets for the first time. But if this is how Plath and Yeats became popular on our Goodreads lists, they mostly remained outside our areas of research interests.

Our earlier and quantifiably more exposure to prose rendered the language of poetry much more ambiguous and metaphorical. Even the most flamboyant and embellished sentence reads easier than a few lines of simple verse: for the "hidden", "underlying" meaning is ostensibly almost always more evident in prose. While this claim can easily be falsified, this has and continues to be the common perception among students when it comes to differentiating between prosaic and poetic language. Moreover, there was an unspoken rule of translation from verse to prose in analysis and interpretation, and words and phrases of poems which were beyond this translation always escaped to intrigue our unsuspecting minds.

This brings us back, quite unsurprisingly, to Plato. If it is language which simultaneously renders poetic thought its manifested nature, then it is also language which fails to interpret that thought accurately. The ideal language for Plato would be one that could directly reflect the eternal and unchanging Forms, and poetic language, with its reliance on sensory experience and figurative expression, often fell short of this ideal. His analysis in the *Republic* of philosophical language, underscores this concern for precision and clarity in the pursuit of knowledge, something which schools and universities are failing, at least for now, when it comes to teaching and learning poetry. If Aristotle was more sympathetic to poetry, then his sympathy also came with clear purposive use of language to convey the plot, mood, and themes of his tragedies. But what challenges our, and most other students', perception of poetic

language being esoteric and incomprehensible compared to the ease of reading and writing prose is the Heideggerian school of thought. If poetic language is the primordial and authentic mode of expression, capable of breaking through this concealment and disclosing the fundamental nature of being, then the language used to teach this poetry is clearly failing spectacularly to reveal anything at all.

The question of whether or not there is a "correct" interpretation of poems, the one that was thrust upon us as students in school and even later, is further complicated by Wittgenstein's "language games" (Wittgenstein, 1953, 5), the concept which contextualises the use of words and their subsequent meanings being heavily dependent on this contextualisation. Wittgenstein's perspective suggests that the meaning of aesthetic words, including those found in poetry, is not fixed or inherent but is deeply intertwined with ways of living and the broader culture in which they are used. He argued that to truly understand aesthetic terms, one must describe the cultural practices and shared understandings that give them meaning. In the context of poetry, this implies that its appreciation and interpretation are not solely based on individual subjective responses but are also shaped by the cultural conventions and literary traditions that surround it. But after experiencing being taught poetry in schools, one wonders whether there is a limit to the extent to which these historical and socio-cultural contexts influence our reading or making meaning of poems prescribed in syllabi.

The most important thought of Wittgenstein in this context is his argument that the way we use language in aesthetic contexts, such as when engaging with poetry, is more akin to a gesture accompanying a complex activity than a judgment stating a property. This perspective emphasizes the expressive and performative aspects of our engagement with art, suggesting that our responses are often more about experiencing and connecting with the work than making definitive statements about its nature or meaning. He drew analogies between music and language, suggesting that the experience of poetry, like music, involves recognizing the "rightness" of a transition or the aptness of an image, often using descriptive terms that are like giving the work a face or using gestures. A key aspect of Wittgenstein's thought relevant to poetry is his emphasis

on "seeing connections" in understanding art (Wittgenstein, 2001). He suggested that appreciating a poem involves recognizing the relationships between different elements within the work, such as its style, themes, and imagery, as well as its connections to other poems, literary traditions, and broader cultural experiences. This "connective analysis" is crucial for aesthetic appreciation and goes beyond simple causal explanations. Wittgenstein also introduced the concept of "seeing-as" or aspect-seeing, which is particularly relevant to the interpretation of poetry. This idea suggests that we might initially understand a poem in one way, but through further reading or reflection, we can come to see it in a different light, recognizing new meanings or interpretations. And it is precisely this dynamic nature which is rendered absolutely static by our current curricula tackling teaching and learning poetry, be it in school education or in colleges. Only in specific research spaces in higher education and university academia is this variety in meaning making encouraged and given scholarly importance. But the fact of the matter remains that our earlier experiences have, by then, already fostered indifference, if not distaste, for poems and poetry.

Encountering poetry for the first time, then engaging with it on an academic level, or moving on to a private and personal appreciation of this genre— all of this occurs in students who may or may not be evolving in an environment conducive to learning or appreciating poetry. And if classrooms were not enough, then digital spaces and online social media platforms now have dramatically increased our interactions and engagement with poetry, notwithstanding the standard, quality, or artistic merit of the said poetry. This inquiry is to raise concerns and ponder over the marginalisation of poetry within educational and academic contexts, all from a place of anxiety— anxiety not only as a student who has faced and noticed this treatment of poetry in academic and educational spaces, but anxiety also as one facing the world where machines are stealing from artists and writing their own poems that are being lauded in certain circles. This reflection reveals, somewhere, a deeper philosophical discomfort with the indeterminate, the affective, and the non-propositional. Our institutional emphasis on analytic clarity, narrative coherence, and interpretive closure has rendered poetic language—ambiguous, gestural, and often non-linear—an object of suspicion or reduction.

Yet it is precisely this ambiguous space that was intuitively grasped in that one classroom moment—the instinctive recognition of poetry, even without a clear rationale, marked a kind of pre-reflective understanding. That the students could so immediately distinguish the poem from the advertisement without being able to explain why it is not a failure of cognition, is but a testament to the very kind of knowing that poetic experience enables. Until our pedagogical and philosophical approaches make room for this mode of recognition—rooted not in certainty but in acclimation—poetry will continue to be taught as something to be decoded, rather than something to be lived and grappled with.

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