

## **A Poem in the Head is Worth Two in the Book**

Debbie Pullinger

*Is there really any point in learning poetry? Drawing on findings from the Cambridge Poetry Teaching Project, a small-scale study of poetry teaching in schools and universities, Debbie Pullinger explores the possible benefits of memorisation.*

Now that we have a thousand poems, quite literally at our fingertips, on laptop, tablet or phone, the idea of keeping the odd ode in our heads may seem rather pointless. The decline of poetry learning over one generation is reflected in findings from our study, where nine participants recalled learning poetry as children, but only four did it with their students. Others were concerned that memorising poetry would, at best, be a waste of precious time and risked putting students off the subject completely.

So what *is* the point? It's an interesting question, and one that relates to the issues raised by changes wrought by the digital society at every level of existence – including the 'outsourcing' of our own memories.

In pre-literate societies such as ancient Greece, where people memorised extraordinary quantities of material, storing texts in the memory was seen as important not only for preservation of wisdom down the generations, but also for the development of the individual. Socrates, who famously resisted the introduction of written texts, regarded words both in speech and in memory as 'living words', dynamic entities full of rhythm, melody, and meaning. Whilst not all of his predictions about the encroachment of writing have proved accurate, an enduring theme is that whereas a word on the page is fixed and connected to a few other words by juxtaposition; in the mind it is connected to a fluid community of other words, images and concepts through a dense, dynamic network of verbal denotation and connotation, and of etymological, aural, and experiential association.

As, over centuries, writing assumed its vital role in societies, memorisation persisted not simply for preservation nor for convenience, but as a means to personal knowledge. Renaissance scholars, for example, transcribed snippets from their

reading into a commonplace book, not merely for ease of reference but so that they could be revisited, rehearsed and committed to memory. These books thus played a vital part in the synthesis that produced understanding, intellectual development and – ultimately – invention and judgement. Shakespeare was in part the product of this memorising culture; it has been suggested that the swathes of literature he learned by heart contributed to his poetic sense of language as well as furnishing his mind with an abundance of myths and stories.

Commonplace books are now, as it were, less commonplace, and when we exert our memories intentionally (multiplication tables, lines in a play, road signs) it's likely to be for a specific purpose (mental arithmetic, performing a play, keeping ourselves safe on the road). Learning poetry, on the other hand, has no measurable outcomes other than a tally of poems learned and no obvious purpose other than being able to recite the poems. But if we return to those earlier reasons for memorising in the light of more recent research on memory and the brain, we can begin to see some possible benefits. Here are just three:

### ***Availability***

The poet Charles Causley once said, 'if, say, 80 per cent of a poem comes across, let us be satisfied. The remainder, with luck, will unfold during the rest of our lives'. This unfolding may be elicited by rereading the poem on the page – when the page is to hand. But words on a page are not available to our mental processes with the same speed and convenience as words in the head. Learning makes both poem and memory continually available to each other for mutual elucidation with an immediacy that the most searchable, accessible, personalised outsourced memory cannot begin to match.

### ***Personal knowledge***

Poetry implies a different kind of learning because it affords a different kind of knowledge. Complex, holistic and subtle, it is a type of knowledge that can never be reduced to a set of facts. This distinction, not available in the English verbs, exists in the difference between the French *savoir* and the German *wissen* (knowing the facts) on the one hand, and the French *connaitre* and the German *kennen* (knowing something in an experiential sense) on the other. It is rather like knowing a person. Neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist says whereas most material objects are perceived and processed by the brain's left cerebral hemisphere, living things are encountered through the right hemisphere. And, extraordinary as it seems, so are works of art. In other words, there is a real sense in which we experience a poem through the same channels of perception as we experience a living, breathing being. So as with becoming acquainted with a person, for which an element of trust and commitment is required, there may be a sense in which we may fully inhabit a poem only if we

allow it to inhabit and in-form us.

### ***Ownership***

There was a strong sense amongst our research participants that the poem in the memory is possessed in a very different way. Indeed, in purely psychological terms, because we have invested time and mental effort in it, we are more likely to be well disposed to a learned poem, to credit it with value and meaning, to discover hidden depths, and to have some sense of mastery over it. And there may be other reasons for that sense of ownership. Poetry is essentially rooted in the body, arguably more than other literary forms. The poem on the page is outside the body, physically and perhaps metaphorically held at arm's length, literally manipulated (with all the distance, physical and metaphorical, which that implies); the memorised poem is held within the body, running along our neural pathways, enabling us in a real sense to speak our mind, so the poem is indeed imagination 'bodied forth'.

For a fuller account, see Pullinger, D. (2012). 'In Living Memory: The Dying Art of Poetry Learning and a Case for Revival', *Changing English*, 19:4

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1358684X.2012.736747>

### **Learning poems: notes from the field**

I myself learned a few poems as a young child, but being in that generation whose schooling was devoid of anything that smacked of rote-learning, I never tackled anything much beyond A A Milne. As my interest in learning poems began to develop, I decided that it would be useful to get some inside experience. So I set to. Here are a few, select 'field notes'.

#### **1. The two-lines rule**

Could I learn a whole poem? Maybe not. Could I learn two lines? Probably. So, I learned each poem, two lines a day. Or rather, at night, just before sleep, I'd stow the first two lines away. Next night: same two lines, and add two more.

#### **2. Picking poems**

I started with poems that had a strong rhythm and metre, thinking they might be easier – which they generally were. Then I moved on to free verse, but only and always things I wanted to give headroom to.

#### **3. Breaking the rule**

If you've just added "Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume,

here / Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion” you’d be mad not to admit “Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!”  
Three for the price of two.

4. **Sticking slippery lines**

You get the odd line that just refuses to stick. Then I ask myself the question: how can I connect this line to the previous one so that I *never ever* lose this line again? The connection may be verbal, visual or semantic; but however tenuous, it generally works.

5. **Skip the test**

When recalling and rehearsing the poem if I concentrate simply on moving through the poem, enjoying its sounds and images – rather than trying to test myself – I generally get on much better.

6. **Poetry in the gaps**

As you don’t need book, iPad or phone (and therefore, also, free hands) you can try them out in any odd moment. Personally, I find there’s something about the shower which is vey conducive to scrubbing up learned poems.

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*The Cambridge Poetry Teaching Project was a small-scale, local area study that investigated experience of and attitudes to poetry teaching throughout the education system, from primary schools through to higher education and teacher training courses. Running from 2010–2012, it was funded by the British Academy and co-ordinated through the Education Faculty at the University of Cambridge.*

*For preprints of two articles about poetry, memorisation and performance by Debbie Pullinger and David Whitley see the poetry projects page on Debbie Pullinger’s website.*

<http://www.debbiepullinger.com/poetry-projects.html>

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