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***The Reader, the Text, the Poem*: the influence and challenge of Louise Rosenblatt**

> *Hey people, come back here! These poems aren't going to appreciate themselves!*
> **Bart Simpson**

Abstract

This paper is a re-examination of Louise Rosenblatt's seminal work of reader-response theory, *The Reader, The Text, The Poem*. I argue that poems are essentially social in nature and that they open up a space in which conversation and interpretation can take place. With Rosenblatt I argue that until a reader engages with a poem, bringing to it a combination of her interest and experience, the text will lie dormant. I go on to argue that this implies a model of pedagogy and discourse about poetry which is currently inimical to the high stakes testing arrangements in the current context in England and the Anglophone world. Via the work of John Dewey, especially his notion of art as experience, I analyse the cultural and critical frameworks which influenced Rosenblatt innovations both directly and indirectly. This includes the tradition of the New Criticism, with its emphasis on empiricism and an assumed reader. For practitioners seeking a model of reader-response and classroom practice that promotes more than pre-prescribed comprehension questions, I offer examples of practice which prefigure the role of talk in aiding the reader's aesthetic and transactional interpretations of poems.

Introduction

To illustrate the argument I shall make in this paper, I offer a short, rhyming poem by the late US poet Shel Silverstein (Wilson and Hughes, 1998, 32):

> **Not Me**
>
> The Slithergadee has crawled out of the sea.
> He may catch all the others, but he
>   won't catch me.
> No you won't catch me, old slithergadee,
> you may catch all the others, but you wo-

I have lost count of the number of times I have read this out loud, with children and adults alike. Whatever the age group of my listeners, the reaction tends to be very similar. There is a short silence of expectation in which listeners wonder if they need to complete the word which appears to have gone missing at the poem's end. This is followed by a murmur, which burgeons slowly into laughter. Beneath this there is a lowing noise, somewhere between a groan and a sigh of relief. Eventually someone says: 'He got eaten!' (they always say 'he').

> 'How do you know?' I say.
> 'Because the poem says.'
> 'But it doesn't say.'
> 'Yes, well, it makes you think that's what's coming because it just stops.'
> 'But how do you know if it doesn't say?'
> 'Because it's there.'
> 'But it's not there. It just stops, halfway through the word 'won't'.' I even show them, to prove it.
> 'But you still know.'
> 'How?'
> 'Because it's made you think about it with the rhyme and everything' (adapted from Wilson, Lifesaving Poems: Shel Silverstein's 'Not Me', August 24, 2013).

I also use the poem in the context of teacher education, partly because it is apparently undemanding, and funny, and I know it will entertain those in the room who have already professed a dislike of poetry, largely on account of what they are quick to tell me about the way they were taught it in school. But I also use it to persuade them that even a poem as overtly non-serious as 'Not Me' enacts before us one of the most profound lessons that reading poetry has to teach us, namely, that a poem does not need to present us with all the available 'facts' for us to know the whole story. Children as young as six can understand this, sometimes even five. But the conversation doesn't stop there.

> 'Does anyone know what a Slithergadee is?' I ask.
> 'It's a monster.'
> 'How do you know? The poem doesn't say.'
> 'Because it's slimy. And it crawls. And it lives in the sea. And it eats people.'
> Others are joining in. 'And it's got big teeth.'
> 'How do you know it's slimy? It doesn't say.'
> 'You just do. You can work it out.'
> 'But it doesn't mention teeth.'
> 'They're really sharp as well.'
> 'How do you know?'
> 'From the pictures in your mind.'
> 'Where do they come from?'
> 'The words.'
> 'Even the ones that aren't there? Draw me what you can see' (adapted from Wilson, 2013).

I have yet to encounter a student (of any age) who was not able to do so. I have not set this exchange up as such, nor do I use the phrase until we have explored all the possibilities that learners have offered me, but this is what 'poetry comprehension' can look like. I owe a debt for this approach to Rosen's notion of poetry-as-conversation (1998), Boroditskya and Rosen (2015), as well as Fox and Merrick (1981), Benton and Fox (1985), P. Benton (1986), Benton et al (1988), and Rosen (1997), all of whom draw their own debt, explicitly or otherwise, to Louise Rosenblatt's seminal work of reader-response theory, *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* ([1978]1994). What each of these thinkers acknowledges, illustrated by the responses of the children I have quoted from, is that until a reader engages with a poem, igniting it with a combination of her interest and experience, the text will lie dormant. A poem is only a living thing once it has been encountered and brought to life by a reader's re-making of it through interpretation. This paper argues that such processes of interpretation are a vital and necessary part of young readers' experience of the written word in school, and that to reduce them to prescribed and narrow sets of questions which privilege linear models of explanation is to diminish poetry's power and deplete its potentiality.

I have written elsewhere (2004; 2014a, 2015a 2015b) about the particular forces which have forged my hybrid identity as a writer and teacher. As I hope the above exchange from classroom dialogue illustrates, I position myself as a poet (Wilson, 1996, 2002, 2006, 2012, 2015, 2019), poetry educator (Wilson with Hughes, 1998; Dymoke et al, 2013; Dymoke et al, 2014) and researcher of poetry practice in classrooms (Wilson, 2009; Wilson, 2010; Wilson and Myhill, 2012; Wilson, 2013; Myhill and Wilson, 2013; Wilson and Dymoke, 2017), who is always seeking to promote the poem, however private its content or mode of address, as essentially social, a space in which conversation both takes place and enacts it in the fact of its being. Within each of these overlapping identities I draw on the work of Rosen (1998), who positioned his own identity as poet and poet-educator identity around a belief in the primacy of 'memorable speech' (Auden, 1935, 105), in that poets and poems are always in dialogue with other social actors, be they poems and writers, or a given or imagined form, political situation, relationship, experience or emotion. As Robert Pinsky has argued, poets need 'not so much an audience as to feel a need to answer' (1988, p. 85), even if they know that no answer will be

forthcoming to their particular cry. I was trained as a teacher in the era when Donald Graves's workshop model had many followers (1983), and to this debt I also add one of gratitude to poet, publisher and writing tutor Peter Sansom (1994). As a beginner poet I was mentored, without ever meeting, by the work of Julia Casterton (1986) and Natalie Goldberg (1986, 1991) who insisted from a feminist perspective that to write was to 'answer' the forces of history, class and geography that would otherwise silence one. It is with this hybrid identity that I come to the work of Rosenblatt, again in a spirit of gratitude.

Rosenblatt's achievement

To understand Rosenblatt's contribution, one is reminded of Vygotsky's injunction (1978) to remember that we are all influenced by the intellectual life (88) of those around us. In the case of Rosenblatt, the ''precipitating' influences' (Beard 2000, 422) upon her work were the dominant school of New Criticism of I. A. Richards (1929) and subsequent followers (Empson 1930; Leavis, 1932; Brooks, 1947), which prefigured the authority of the author and his (sic) intentions. Rosenblatt was also influenced by the work of John Dewey (1934), not least his work on the arts as a transformative experience for both practitioner and viewer (Pike, 2003). Her achievement was to reject the predominant Lockean philosophy of her time, which prefigured the empiricist belief in the primacy of the created text having a fixed meaning. As we shall discuss later, this is a model of literary analysis which still predominates in the high stakes testing arrangements of learners in England (DfE, 2014).

Further, she insisted that a poem is an event in time, not the record of one ([1978]1994, 12). To illustrate, she presents Wallace Stevens's poem 'The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm' ([1954] 2006) as a working model of the 'coming-together', [the] compenetration of a reader and a text' ([1978] 1994, 12), in which the former

> brings to the text [her] past experience and present personality. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text [she] marshals [her] resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience, which [she] sees as the poem. This becomes part of the ongoing stream of [her] life experience, to be reflected on from any angle important to [her] as a human being' (1978] 1994, 12).

The declarative and hypnotically repetitive sentences of Stevens's poem reprise this argument as an aesthetic experience, interweaving with one another to create the impression of a reader alone with a text seeking 'perfection of thought':

> The house was quiet and the world was calm.
> The reader became the book; and summer night
>
> Was like the conscious being of the book.
> The house was quiet and the world was calm.
>
> The words were spoken as if there was no book,
> Except that the reader leaned above the page,
>
> Wanted to lean, wanted much most to be
> The scholar to whom his book is true, to whom
>
> The summer night is like a perfection of thought.
> The house was quiet because it had to be.
>
> The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind:
> The access of perfection to the page.
>
> And the world was calm. The truth in a calm world,
> In which there is no other meaning, itself
>
> Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself
> Is the reader leaning late and reading there.

As certain as the poem sounds, it is also playfully aware of how far a tone of certainty can achieve a suggestion of dreamlike encounter and co-construction of knowledge. We read that 'the house *was* quiet and the world *was* calm' (my italics); that 'the reader *became* the book'; that the house was quiet *because it had to be*' and that 'the quiet *was part of the meaning*'. These apparently artless statements climax across the poem's final four lines, in one extraordinary sentence, which would lead us to believe that 'the truth in a calm world' 'itself/ Is calm', 'in which there is *no other meaning*'. And yet there are gaps between the confident tone of certainty set up by the poem's assertions and the similes at its heart. The reader might have become her book, but the summer night is only *'like* the conscious being of the book'. The scholar wants to lean, wants 'much most to be/ The scholar to whom his book is true': it is as though consciousness of wanting so much from the reading experience creates an awareness that any summer night can only ever be '*like* a perfection of thought'. There is a book and

there is a scholar. But the poem would also want us to believe that it was '*as if* there was no book'. Thus, the poem simultaneously undercuts and outstrips its own certainties, by creating the possibility of saying things it does not appear to mean. Without these gaps there is no co-construction of meaning between the reader and text in the poem, and no poetry for readers of the poem.

Rosenblatt adopts various metaphors to explain the transactional process between reader and poem: the poem as play script; as musical score, the poet setting down 'notations' ([1978] 1994, p.13) for the reader; and as electric circuit with different working components which change, and therefore the poem with it, and are dependent upon the reader's experience and the time and place in which they encounter the poem. In this sense, poems become machines which teach their reader how they are to be read, leading to the injunction among poetry teachers that each poem is only as 'good' as its reader (Sansom, 1994).

Poetry in a neoliberal context

The current context of assessment and formal reporting in English primary education is not one that is favourable to the teaching of poetry. In part this is for historical reasons. At least as far back as the Bullock Report (DES 1975) and arguably further (see the surveys of P. Benton 1986 and Wade and Sidaway 1990), before the establishment of the National Curriculum (DES, 1990) in England and Wales and formal procedures of testing and league tables which underpin the current high stakes context (Sainsbury 2009), Benton felt confident in naming poetry teaching the 'Cinderella' of the English curriculum (1978 114). Similarly, and with greater research evidence to support their claims, Ofsted's now-distant survey of poetry pedagogy (2007) in English schools bemoaned a lack of depth in teachers' subject knowledge, concomitant with, and, one could argue, a lack of confidence, based upon ideas received from their own schooling. Again, this was not new news: Yarlott and Harpin (1970-71), P. Benton (1986) and HMI (DES 1987) describe a similar picture in surveys from a different era. At the same time, one also notices the effects of years of neoliberal policy in education across the UK and Anglophone world as a whole (Wright, 2012; Connell, 2013; Lipman, 2013; Slater, 2015;), characterised by high stakes reporting, centralisation of education policy, a narrowing of the

curriculum and an almost permanent, taken-for-granted 'discourse of derision' (Ball, 1990, 73) towards teachers. When Rosenblatt prefaced *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* by noting that her methodology for selecting from great works of philosophy, psychology and literary theory was guided by 'a sense of the human being in a reciprocal relationship with the natural and social environment' (Rosenblatt, [1978]1994, xiv) she could have been summarising all that was aspirational about recent government policy in England, with its emphasis on 'discursive […] high quality oral work' (DfEE, 1998, 8), the emphasis on the integration of speaking, listening, reading and writing (DfEE/QCA,1999, 50) and the current emphasis on 'a strong command of the spoken […] word' (DfE, 2013, 3). I also argue, however, that the movement of poetry's status from 'Cinderella' (Benton, 1978) to 'mixed' (Wilson, 2009) is a mirror of what has happened within language arts education in England as a whole and is entirely in keeping with neoliberal education policy reforms. After drama, possibly the least notionally utilitarian domain of knowledge and practice in the primary and secondary English education, poetry has now been colonised by a testing regime which seeks to measure that which is measurable, not that which is always of value.

I argue that evidence of this can be seen in the way that successive UK governments of all parties have deliberately engaged in a bifurcated discourse (Alexander, 2004; Brehony, 2005; Hartley, 2006) in the domain of education policy as it relates to the language arts (Alexander, 2010). To take a recent example, within the last decade this has seen reforms to education which included a 'phonics partnership grant programme' (DfE, 2015, 5), funding for a programme supporting the setting up of book clubs for pupils in KS2, and a request for 'all schools to arrange library membership for all their Year 3 pupils' (4, 5, 21). This intervention also included the promotion of learning poetry by heart and an extension of the national competition for poetry recitation of the same name (2, 6, 23). The headline-grabbing push for library membership and learning of poems by heart masks the deeper reality of the same government cutting state funding for libraries by up to £30% under the aegis of austerity (Busby, 2019; Flood, 2019; UNISON, 2019), and that book loans to children fell between 32%-56% in some parts of England in the same period (Harris, 2017). As with so many education policy announcements during and since the New Labour era (Alexander, 2004; Brehony, 2005;

Hartley, 2006; Galton, 2007), the key policy identifier regarding reading pedagogy, an injection of £23.7m for 14,000 selected schools to buy government-approved phonics resources (DfE, 2015, 9), has remained long after the softer-edged wrappings of promises for library membership and learning poetry by heart have vanished from the headlines.

In this way, I argue that the bifurcated discourse, noted by Rosen (2018a), of recent governments in relation to reading policy in England has co-opted and rebranded poetry as a 'heritage product' from the past, conjuring folkloric (and, no doubt for some, comforting) images in the popular media of Victorian rote learning methods, with obedient children sitting in rows and chanting classic verse chosen by their teachers. Indeed, drawing on the definition of colonisation used by Pirbhai-Illich et al (2017), I would go further and argue that, as with grammar (Cameron 1995; Myhill 2009) poetry has been colonised by successive Conservative-led UK governments because of what it symbolises in the popular imagination, in which 'the poet' (Rosen 2015, 2018b) colludes with the examiner as an all-knowing authority figure who determines the meanings of poems, guiding learners towards fixed answers from which there can be no deviation, even though perfectly reasonable alternatives are available. Thus, as Rosen (2015, 2018b) has shown, poems are atomised in Year 6 National Tests (DfE 2014) to narrow the space of 'conversation' (Rosen 1998; Boroditskya and Rosen 2015) that poems so naturally afford. I argue that a wider conversation about poetry, who is publishing and reading it, is long overdue in the UK. Notwithstanding the popularity in UK classrooms of single author collections and anthologies, by, among others, John Agard and Grace Nichols (1994, 1998, 2011), John Agard (2005), James Berry (1984, 1991, 2002), Valerie Bloom (2004, 2008, 2009), Jackie Kay (1994, 1996, 2007), Grace Nichols (1990, 2006) and Benjamin Zephaniah (1994, 1996), and the anti-racist and pro-justice work that these and other authors have consistently promoted, the Black Writers' Guild (2020) have called on British publishers to address the 'the deep-rooted racial inequalities in the major corporate publishing companies'. Recent calls to decolonise the history curriculum (see Goodfellow, 2019, and Moncrieffe et al, 2019) are no less relevant in the case of poetry.

I argue that the co-operative and dialogic model of learning promoted by Barnes et al (1986), Cazden (2001) and Alexander (2008, 2010), reimagined in the poetry-specific context by, among others, Rosen (1997, 1998), P. Benton (1986), Benton et al (1988) and Dymoke et al (2014) is under threat from recent orders (DfE, 2013). This is evidenced by, and symptomatic of, the neoliberal 'grip of market logic' (Connell 2013, 102) as the essential model for education, with its concomitant emphasis on performativity (Ball 2003; Craft and Jeffrey 2008; Burnard and White 2008; Troman 2008; Connell 2013; Munday 2014; Keddie 2016), across all sectors of education in the Anglophone world. As Wyse and Opfer (2010) and more recently Soler (2016) have demonstrated, in the subject domain of reading, especially early reading, so-called reading wars have been used by policy makers to foster a climate of distrust in expert research (Soler 2016) and which promote reductionist models of what reading is, based on evidence that is questionable (Wyse & Styles 2007; Wyse & Goswami 2008; Ellis and Moss 2014; Clark, 2018a, 2018b). Far from parents, schools and learners being offered choice of curricula and pedagogical approach, neoliberal education policy, as iterated by successive UK governments, has consistently centralised policy and constricted classroom implementation, characterised by over-reliance on prescribed teaching materials promoted by vested interests (Mansell 2012) and the disregarding of practitioners' and researchers' judgements and findings (Soler 2016). Soler is especially scathing about this, not least because markets have been seen so palpably to have failed in the recent societal and economic crises sparked by the financial crash of 2008. What she says is worth quoting in full:

> The current emphasis on depoliticization, individualism, and financialization is central to the way the reading wars have been enacted and situated in public debates and professional discourses. We can see the impact of these foundational ideals—embodied within neoliberalism—in the increasing deprofessionalization and commodification of early-literacy teaching and programmes. Further, an international domination of neoliberal-based literacy policies and curricula can potentially accentuate what Patti Lather (2012) calls the ''quantitative reductionism'' that follows the ''metric mania'' that neoliberalism promotes (Soler 2016, 431).

As Lather (2012) has put it, under the aegis of neoliberalism 'we have seen the abuses of the use of scientific authority in the interests of the state' (1023).

Rosenblatt's contribution

Rosenblatt ([1978]1994) shows how she drew on the ideas of Dewey (1934 and [1896]1963), Dewey and Bentley (1949) and Bentley (1954) to frame her theory of 'transactional' reading (16 and ff.). This presupposes that, far from viewing an organism (the reader) and its environment (the text) as 'separate, self-contained, and already defined entities' (17), acting or interacting on one another, like two billiard balls colliding (17), the transaction between them is mutual. Rejecting a model of reading in which 'the reader interprets the text' and/or 'the text produces a response in the reader' (16), Rosenblatt is unequivocal: 'the relationship between reader and text is not linear'. Instead, borrowing from Bentley (1954, 285) reading is an 'event' (16), a word she uses throughout *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* to emphasise that reading is a situational activity occurring in different times and spaces. Further, Rosenblatt, again via Dewey, goes on to stress that this process of mutual and non-linear transaction is active. During the reading event, each element (reader/text) is 'conditioned by' and conditions the other (17) in 'continuing activity' (Dewey [1896]1963, 255). In this way Rosenblatt, via Dewey and Bentley, rejects a dualistic model of reading. This interplay of different kinds of thinking in different times and places, what P. Benton (1986) has called a 'continuous shuttling' (63), is also what takes place between Rosenblatt's other key contribution ([1978] 1994), namely her defining of efferent and aesthetic reading (23-4). As I have argued, this model of reading is far from that which is proposed by curricular orders and testing arrangements in the current context. Rosenblatt's distinction ([1978] 1994) between efferent and aesthetic reading is a pivotal insight into the different motivations readers have for reading as well as the different processes at work when they do so. She defines efferent reading (22) as the 'residue of information' (25) that remains '*after*' the reading is finished (23, author's italics), whether that is contained in the form of an action to take, a solution to a problem, or new information which is absorbed (23). This presupposes the reader arriving to the moment of reading with agency and being an active participant in the process of locating, understanding and retrieval of salient information. As Dewey says, '[A text] *becomes* the stimulus in virtue of what the organism is already preoccupied with' ([1896]1963, 255) (author's italics). During aesthetic reading, on the other hand, while also presupposing the reader as having agency in the reading process, '*the reader's attention is centered directly on what [she] is living through during [her] relationship with that particular text*' (25, author's italics). Rosenblatt expands

this idea with two sentences which are tellingly conditional ('If a literary work of art is to ensue…'; 'Only if the reader turns [her] attention inward…', 28) but nevertheless argue for the primacy of intent that a reader brings to the moment of encountering a poem. Crucially, this argues that a poem will only happen if the reader's attention is focused as much upon the poem-as-object as it is upon the 'transaction' (28) that occurs between them, or to use a phrase of Coleridge quoted by Rosenblatt, upon '*the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself*' (1907, 6) (author's italics).

There is much congruence here with a metaphor used by Iser (1978) which is also couched in conditional terms. In his explication of reader-response theory, via a passage of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Iser writes about 'the game of the imagination' (1978, 108) which allow the reader to bring their 'own faculties into play' (108). It is only at this point, he argues, that the reader becomes 'productive' (108). This cannot be achieved, he argues, 'if the text sets out to be anything more than a set of governing rules' (108). This again has echoes of Dewey ([1896]1963). As in Dewey, he replaces the notion of the 'subject-object relationship' (1978, 109) with the idea of a 'moving viewpoint which travels along *inside* that which it has to apprehend' (109) (author's italics). This also contains shades of a metaphor employed by Nobel-laureate Seamus Heaney (1988), which is itself reminiscent of Coleridge. Heaney frames the reading (and writing) of poetry as '[holding] attention for a space […] a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves' (108). As noted by Wilson (2008), could it be that Seamus Heaney's description of what occurs between the reader and writer of a poem is also a description of fully realised pedagogy, as a site of dialogic reflexivity?

The influence of Rosenblatt on post-war practitioners

Benton (1993) has given a full account of reader-response and transactional theories (Rosenblatt [1978] 1994; Iser, 1978) and their influence upon modern classrooms and pedagogy. His premise is that during the 1940s and 1960s, under the influence of American New Criticism (Richards,1929; Empson 1930), 'the reader was hidden from view' in literary studies (1993, 9), a situation which was

to change from the 1960s with its emphasis on education. According to Benton this 'direct relationship with pedagogy' (1993, 12) is a key principle underpinning Rosenblatt and Iser's work, not least in the way that they engaged with 'real and implied readers' (11) as opposed to the assumed reader found in New Criticism. Benton ascribes to these theorists a 'sea-change' (1993, 12) in the 'culture of the classroom' (11) which is at the same time the 'evolutionary successor to Leavisite liberal humanism' (12). A second founding premise of this work is that 'the text cannot be said to have a meaningful existence outside the relationship between itself and its readers' (11-12). It is this 'transfer of power' (12) which is the real marker of impact upon teachers and their classrooms.

Although Rosenblatt's work is singular and seminal in itself, with varying degrees of direct acknowledgement it was also a key influence on the work of scholars who argued for poetry's uniqueness and primacy during the late post-war period and bridged the space between theory and practice (Benton et al 1988; Benton and Fox 1985; P. Benton 1986), before the arrival of the first National Curriculum in England (DES, 1990). Also shadowing these important texts is the work of James Britton (1986; 1982a; 1982b) and Wade (1981): the former for re-asserting that reading poetry is an experience (1982a, 12), and, via the work of Brooks (1947), an event in its own right (1982b, 27); the latter for analysing pupils' classroom talk when discussing poems. Again, with varying degrees of direct acknowledgement, it could also be argued that Britton and his colleagues' work (Barnes et al 1986) on the unchaperoned classroom talk of pupils was also an important influence on P. Benton (1986) and Benton et al (1988) whose analyses of pupils discussing poems without a teacher being present to guide (or hinder) them remain both an inspiration and a challenge to this day.

Aesthetic and transactional reading in practice

For practitioners wanting to locate positive examples of the benefits of aesthetic and transactional reading of poetry by pupils in the classroom, several instances can be found in the work of P. Benton (1986), Hurst (1988), Wilson (2014), and Wilson (2014a, 2014b, 2015b). To take the work of P. Benton first, it is worth pointing out that the method used for capturing pupils' talk was to record small groups of unsupervised Year 9 pupils discussing specific poems in rooms that were near to the

rest of the class, but without intervention from other pupils or teachers. Discussions were not given a time limit. P. Benton (1986) gives a detailed account of one of these, reporting 'over 600 exchanges' and 'forty-five minutes' of talk between pupils (36) discussing Ted Hughes's 'The Warm and the Cold' (*Season Songs*, 1976; see Appendix). As he drily notes, 'even with a skilful and enlightened teacher, the group's engagement with the poem would probably have taken quite a different form' (36). I shall draw out some wider points of pedagogical implication at the end of this section, but note, for now, his intended corollary, that pupils are seldom allowed such unfettered freedom to talk in the classroom, let alone about individual poems, and in such detail.

Practitioners in search of a working model of students demonstrating talk that is accountable (Michaels et al, 2008) to fellow students, to standards of reasoning and to knowledge (2008, 283) will find a 'word-hoard' (Heaney, 1975, 20) that is as rich in questioning and hypothesis-testing as it is in personal honesty:

Nick	One thing about this poem is that it's a lot of effort to read it –
Graham	Yeah.
Tom	Yeah. Some poems.
Zoe	– On your own. It's not so much effort when you're doing it all together but on your own – to get right into it like we have done –
Graham	But in class –
Tom	– we wouldn't bother really looking (P. Benton, 1986, 34).

In these exchanges one discovers a mimetic similarity between students 'really looking' at a poem, going and getting 'right into it' (34) as they put it, and active listening. They socially construct their learning in a situated, non-linear fashion that is almost a textbook example of constructivism at work (Vygotsky, 1978), relying on the scaffolding (Wood et al, 1976) of the others' questions and prompts as much as their hesitations and misconceptions. The features of this talk, as analysed by P. Benton, are:

- Concentration on the meanings of single words and images combined with 'an intuitive feeling for the central concerns of the poem' (36);

- Thinking aloud, via repetition and 'savouring' of key lines and phrases, implicitly recognising that 'meaning- making may require words to be read aloud and not heard only in the head' (38);

- The 'need for clear visualisation of […] images' (39);

- 'A willingness to declare uncertainty or puzzlement' (38).

As well as moving *from* efferent *to* aesthetic reading, then, we see in this summary a consistent interplay between them, which is present throughout the entire exchange. Examples of moving from unpicking meanings of particular words to exposition of wider themes can be seen right from the outset of the discussion, as the students begin reading the poem (exchanges 1-17, 36). This is taken to a new level of depth in the following set of exchanges (47-66, 39), when the group combine to correct Nick's misconceived inference that the owl 'on the gatepost' in line 11 of stanza 2 is there because it is having 'a rest', 'asleep' 'in the middle of the afternoon' (39):

Tom	It's not the middle of the afternoon, is it?
Zoe	It makes it feel like dusk.
Nick	It's dusk.
Tom	It's dusk. Well, I mean…
Zoe	Late afternoon.
Tom	It's not the afternoon is it?
Zoe	Late afternoon.
Tom	Seven o'clock, isn't it?
Graham	Look: 'Freezing dusk has tightened/ Like a nut screwed tight.' It's clever.
Zoe	It's getting darker and darker.
Tom	Yeah, yeah! (*excitedly*)

This is a layered and complex exchange. Tom's role is not merely negative ('It's not the afternoon is it?'); he also makes a leap of the imagination in suggesting it is 'seven o'clock', a very precise notation that cannot be found in the text of the poem. Nick's recollection that the poem is describing dusk (stanza 1, line 1; stanza 2, line 1) prompts Graham, several interjections later, to clarify the timeframe of the poem's action not by explication but by rereading the stanza's opening lines ('Freezing dusk has tightened…'). This in turn prompts Zoe to see, in P. Benton's words, that 'a process is at work in the poem, that it is not static' (39). As Benton notes: 'Graham, caught almost unawares by the poem's 'cleverness', reads on without prompting' (39) the opening four lines of the poem's next stanza. P. Benton also remarks that this kind of sophisticated 'leapfrogging of listening

and speaking' (Britton 1986, 120) recalls Rosenblatt's drawing upon Coleridge's famous lines about the 'attractions of the journey itself' (1907, 6) outweighing both the reader's 'curiosity' and their desire to arrive at a 'solution' ([1978] 1994, 28).

The pedagogical implication of this is that students need plenty of time if they are to engage with poems at an aesthetic level, not least efferently. Poems do not yield the layers of their meaning, sonically, lexically, figuratively and formally, combining and setting off connections and provocations, some of which are 'useful' and others less so, unless pupils are given time to explore and experience, to make meaning for themselves without the pressure of believing that there is a secret 'correct' answer to which they will be ushered in due course, either for or against their better judgement.

Valuing students' talk about poems

Another example of recording (and displaying) children's voices as they discuss poems is given by Wilson (2014b). This tells the story of a support teacher who would withdraw small groups of pupils, whose language needs were complex and at risk of being overlooked in the large classes to which they belonged, to read and discuss poems. Influenced by Chambers (2011), she based her pedagogy in trying to do as little talking as possible, opening her lessons with the question 'Tell me…'. As pupils grew in confidence and fluency, news of these support groups began to circulate among staff and pupils alike. With the pupils' permission, the teacher recorded, transcribed and displayed their conversation about Frank Collymore's poem 'The Spider' (Agard and Nichols, 1994; see Appendix):

> The effect was electrifying. Children crowded round the display board,
> jostling to see their names in print next to the poem. Calling their friends to
> come and see their work, they swapped high-fives, laughing to recall what
> they had said in the lesson, thrilled to see their own names. Watching them,
> the teacher thought she discerned a new language being spoken, one she
> had not heard in the school before […] Each day for a week that corridor was
> never empty (Wilson, 2014b, 207; 2015, 66).

The implications for pedagogy which flow from this example, much as those from P. Benton (1986) and Benton et al (1988) which precede it, is much less to do with technology (recording and transcribing) and much more to do with intrinsically and explicitly valuing pupils' classroom talk. This is a fundamental pedagogical belief which expects pupils to have experiences, knowledge and views that are influenced by their lives *outside* of the classroom (Martin, 2008; Catling and Martin, 2011; Little and Chesworth, 2017) and celebrates these *inside* the classroom. It opposes the folkloric view of pupil-as-empty-vessel (Bruner, 1996, 49; Rodriguez, 2012) who waits to be filled with teacher-knowledge. In poetic terms it promotes poetry as a site of conversation (Rosen 1997, 1998), from pupil to pupil as well as teacher to pupil, and between pupils and poems. As Rosen has pointed out, poetry's 'scavenging' capacity to pay 'close attention to feelings, ideas, unfamiliar ways of looking at the world, suggestiveness, open-ended questioning and ludic approaches to language' (Boroditskya and Rosen, 2015, 73, 69), is under threat from the prescribed model of 'comprehension', and thus of pedagogy, exemplified in recent orders (DfE, 2013) and exemplifications (see Rosen, 2015, 2018, on DfE, 2014) because it 'eliminates the child's point of view from the permitted range of responses' to poems (Boroditskya and Rosen, 2015, 69).

We end with another example of classroom discourse which exemplifies the advantages of prefiguring pupil's genuine responses to poems in a safe and dialogic environment. The following is a critical incident from the field notes of Wilson's PhD study (2004) into the poetry writing of KS2 pupils. He describes a lesson from the beginning of his study, when he was still getting to know his participants, in which he read to them 'The Tyger' by William Blake (see Appendix). Again, it is worth quoting in full:

> After reading 'The Tyger' to the class I chose to ask what pictures went through their minds as I was reading the poem. After a few slightly predictable answers about forests and tigers one boy put up his hand and said this: 'I think it is about a big forest and a little forest. The little forest is trapped inside the big forest and is struggling to escape from it. It is a real struggle. Eventually the little forest breaks free and makes its way to edge of the big forest. It looks out. What it can see on the other side is the First World War.' There was a silence. Nobody knew what to say next. I thanked the boy for his comment and said that I found it interesting. Then I did something I had not done consciously in my teaching before. Instead of saying what I wanted to say, which was to debate with the boy's interpretation of the poem, or read another poem perhaps, I asked the class if the boy's answer had made anyone else think about the poem differently. All their hands went up. (Wilson, 2014b; 2015, 63).

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First, it is important to recognise the bravery and commitment of this pupil's comment. At the time I was not well-known to the class; we were still in the early stages of getting to know one another, a phase often characterised by answers to questions which seek to please the teacher rather than ones, like this, which provoke more questions and which refuse to fall out of the conversation Bakhtin (1986, 168). The pedagogical implication of this incident is not that the pupil's interpretation was inaccurate (how could we expect it to be otherwise after only one hearing of the poem?), but that we can see in it the potential for a discussion about the poem's sense of menace and danger, the fear of entrapment, the question of what constitutes 'nature', and how that same nature, red in tooth and claw, can be seen to be created 'good'. As teachers we make countless choices on a moment-by-moment basis: we live with the inherent tension of all classroom interaction that to include one response is to exclude another; to validate one pupil's perspective is to (unconsciously or otherwise) question another's. As Wilson goes on to say, allowing personal responses that may not include a so-called 'right answer' into our poetry pedagogy is 'disruptive and risky: disruptive because it foregrounds poetry's essence as a democratic and subjective art-form; and risky because it requires enough confidence not to take control and dominate the discussion, both in terms of subject and pedagogical knowledge. In this way poetry can help us enjoy the paradox of 'losing' power in order to gain new kinds of knowledge' (2015, 63). In moments such as these, we begin to see the truth of Heaney's metaphor of poems as 'thresholds' 'constantly approached and […] departed from' (1988, 107-8). This implied message of such a pedagogy bears out the rhetorical claim of Fox and Merrick (1981) and Benton and Fox (1985), namely, that poems are to be experienced by students before they are analysed.

Conclusion

Teachers' uncertainty about teaching poetry remains persistent on many levels and has existed for many years (see Yarlott and Harpin, 1970-71; P. Benton, 1986, 9-33; DES, 1987; Wade and Sidaway 1990; and, more recently, Ofsted, 2007). In the collusive context of current testing arrangements, the

threat of poetry pedagogy as a 'sterile game' (P. Benton, 1986, 35) or domineered by the 'one-way traffic' (DES, 1975, 9.21) of teacher talk, characterised by teachers seeking 'confirmation of their own interpretation rather than encouraging […] pupils' personal search for meaning' (P. Benton, 1986, 35) is never far away. To read Hurst, a poetry enthusiast, reflecting on his own teaching as 'guilt-ridden' and full of 'unease and doubt' (1988, 157) is to encounter again a deep sense of the unfulfilled gap between the promise of poetry and the reality of many classrooms. Rosenblatt ([1978] 1994, 3), shows us that debates as to the value of poetry in society and education are not new. The main effort of her project, as vital now as it was in her very different context, was to challenge the role of the reader as 'invisible eavesdropper' (2) and to move her to 'the center of the stage' (4). Rosenblatt argued that this privileges neither 'extreme subjectivism' (4) on the one hand, which positions the reader as a 'tabula rasa' 'receiving the imprint of "the poem"' (4), nor a view of the text as 'empty, awaiting the content brought by the reader' (4) on the other. Even further away from the high stakes context we currently enjoy, LAG Strong insisted that 'A child's misconceptions may be of much greater value […] than the explanation which destroys it' (Strong, 1946, 1). Unless policy makers learn to trust the value of this dictum by encouraging pedagogy that risks explicit valuing of pupils' aesthetic interpretations of poems, we face a greater risk of losing poetry's potentiality in the culture at large. I argue that Rosenblatt's placing the reader at the centre of 'the limelight' ([1978] 1994, 5) is of more urgent concern to us as educators than ever before.

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Appendix

The Warm and the Cold

Freezing dusk is closing
   Like a slow trap of steel
On trees and roads and hills and all
   That can no longer feel.
     But the carp is in its depth
      Like a planet in its heaven.
     And the badger in its bedding
      Like a loaf in the oven.
     And the butterfly in its mummy
      Like a viol in its case.
     And the owl in its feathers
      Like a doll in its lace.

Freezing dusk has tightened
   Like a nut screwed tight
On the starry aeroplane
   Of the soaring night.
     But the trout is in its hole
      Like a chuckle in a sleeper.
     The hare strays down the highway
      Like a root going deeper.
     The snail is dry in the outhouse
      Like a seed in a sunflower.
     The owl is pale on the gatepost
      Like a clock on its tower.

Moonlight freezes the shaggy world
   Like a mammoth of ice -
The past and the future
   Are the jaws of a steel vice.
     But the cod is in the tide-rip
      Like a key in a purse.
     The deer are on the bare-blown hill
      Like smiles on a nurse.
     The flies are behind the plaster
      Like the lost score of a jig.
     Sparrows are in the ivy-clump
      Like money in a pig.

Such a frost
   The flimsy moon
     Has lost her wits.

     A star falls.

The sweating farmers
  Turn in their sleep
    Like oxen on spits.

Ted Hughes, from *Season Songs* (Faber, 1976)

The Spider

I'm told that the spider
Has coiled up inside her
Enough silky material
To spin an aerial
One-way track
To the moon and back,
Whilst I
Cannot even catch a fly.

Frank Collymore, from *A Caribbean Dozen* (Walker Books, 1994)

The Tyger

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

William Blake