A Student-Friendly Approach to Contemporary Poetry

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الملخّـــــص:

يتخذ هذ البحث من الشعر العمودي المعاصر منطلقا له. رغم كونه جزءا من المناهج، إلا أنه تلقئ القليل من الإهتمام. كما أن طرق التدريس غير الفعالة جلبت معها غضب الطلبة من شعر جميل في أساسه. وزادت المقارنة المجحفة والمختلة من كراهية الطلبة لهكذا نوع من الشعر. في الحقيقة، إن اشعر العمودي المعاصر صرخة مدوية علئ بشاعة العصر الذي نعيش فيه. هدفي من هذا البحث هو تقديم الشعر العمودي المعاصر بشكل ودي لطلبة الجامعين لمسادعتهم علئ أستصاغة الجانب الفكري والإبداعي في هذا النوع من الشعر.

Abstract:

The current paper undertakes to probe contemporary poetry. In spite of being an integral part of the curruculum, contemporary poetry has received very little attention. The uneffective methods of teaching contemporary poetry brought about the alienation of the students from an otherwise beautiful poetry. This fact is even more aggravated when both traditional and contemporary poetry types are unfairly and malaladroitly juxtaposed. In essence, contemporary poetry is an outcry against the ''ugliness''of modern times. The purpose is to introduce contemporary poetry in a student-friendly approach to help tertiary students appreciate its intellectual and creative aspects.

Introduction

The current paper attempts to present a student-friendly approach to contemporary poetry in our Algerian tertairy EFL classes. Unlike fiction, understanding contemporary poetry by non-native students attests to be a daunting challenge. The researcher has a quiet if sensible hope that this contribution will dispell students' fear of undertaking to study modern(ist) poetry.

1. **Contemporary Poetry and School Curriculums**

Literary texts have always been part and parcel of school curriculums; students have been exposed to poetic texts (e.g., the national hymn, short poems, and limerick) since the early years of the primary schools. Tomlinson (2003: 406) validates ''Literature is well established in the curriculum and its presence is rarely questioned''. It should be noted, however, that learners have oftentimes been exposed to traditional poetry with its excessive, obsessive focus on esthetical devices.

To understand better 20th c. poetry's penetrating features, both teachers and ELLs need to do this: They have to put an X-ray film on Da Vinci's Mona Lisa. Da Vinci, the Renaissance man (*double entendre* intended) wanted to paint a beautiful lady with sad eyes and a shy smile; maybe he wanted to sparkle people's interest in the painting. By putting an X-ray film on Mona Lisa's bust, people would see her bone structure and whether or not she was beautiful outside as well as inside. In sum, 20th c. poets prefer to have a doctor's view of X-ray films rather than *Renaissance* paintings. T. S. Eliot echoes "The essential advantage of a poet is not to have a beautiful world with which to deal: it is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness: to see the boredom and the horror and the glory." By being truthful and accurate, 20th c. poets appear to be provocative, which may displease untrained audience.

2. **Nature of 20th c. Poetry**

For short of a better term, the option has been for the term *20th c poetry*, but other terms such as modern and/ contemporary may be used to refer to the poetic productions that characterized 20th c. Therefore, *modern poetry in the context of the present paper is taken to mean all the poetic production that has been generated as from the turn of the 20th c. and whose form and subject have done away with*

traditional conception of the art in verse. It should be noted, however, that modern poetry does not refer specifically to modernist poetry. Rather, it deals with that poetry that has broken away with exaltation of emotions or the regularity and excellence in production. A posteriori, the poets' concern has markedly shifted from being a more passive literary beautician to someone whose frustration urged him to question those most cherished values of the 20th c. society.

It appears that modern poetry has shifted its perspective from the *description of beauty* to the *portrayal of ugliness*. The duality beauty-ugliness actually completes its double facets rather than playing up one concept at the detrimant of the other. Traditional poets seem to be ignoring ''ugliness'' while modern poets are so aware of both that their focus on ugliness meant only that they want to efface that ugliness that disturbs and maims beauty. Eliot recognizes that ''describing ugliness and horror ... it thereby lifts from us its burden'' (quoted in Howarth (187). Precisely, this new vision of the other half makes modern poetry more appealing. According to Ryan (2007: 2) ''Good literature disturbs us and takes us out of our habitual and routine ways of seeing the world''. Differently stated, 20th c. poetry challenges our traditional views of an otherwise ugly world, and therefore it is not bound to gratify the five senses. Instead, it aims to make people (re)live the poets' vicarious experience, which is frequently painful and unpleasant.

Along those lines, Barthes (cited in Hugh 2005: xiii) explains:

> The invasion of literature by *description* was parallel to that of painting by *landscape*. A *description* is composed of sentences whose order can generally *reverse* : I can describe this room by a series of clauses whose order is not important. A gaze roams as it wishes. Nothing more natural, nothing more *true*, than this vagrancy ; for *truth is chance*…. This mode of creating, legitimate in principle, and to which we owe so many beautiful things, leads, like the abuse of landscape, to *the dimunition of the intellectual part of art*.

20th c. poets have attested themselves to be highly intellectual that aim to sensitize modern societies to the dramatic changes that threaten the very existence of humankind. In no instance have 20th c. poets

claimed to be beauticians, for the latter deliberately disguise the true nature of things.

To achieve the desired effect on their audiences, modern poets resort to a special use of language. Language becomes metaphoric – frequently extremely metaphoric- to the extent it breaks away with conventions. Both form and content of modern poetry are manipulated to the extremes, which may account for the ambiguity and difficulty to grasp the evasive meaning couched by modern poets. Consequently, 20th c. poets prove themselves to be ''riddle makers'' for their audiences ; euphony and imaginative locutions were concerns of past poets. Womser and Cappella (2000: xi) explain ''As poetry has been constructed of fragments … poets have been careful to distance themselves from sheer eloquence''. Emotions-appealing discourse does not seem to be appealing to 20th c. poets, this accounts for their detachment from traditional devices used to display the poets' eloquence and complete mastery of the language.

20th c. poetry attests to be interested in juxtaposing paradoxes, qualities that are contradictory : wealth vs. poverty, health vs. sickness, love vs. Cruelty, and beauty vs. ugliness. Through the use seemingly contradictory to the common sense, modern poets increase tension and suspense in their readers' minds. Foakes (nd) (cited in Jayyusi 1977 : 681) considers moderrn poetry ''in clusive poetry, which offred an experience in its entirety, complex and full of contradictions''. It may be argued that contradictory concepts may be better expressed and eventually understood when standing face to face. The utilization of the paradox is one way to put the dualities love-cruelty, wealthe-poverty, and beauty-ugliness at the fore of the 20th c. poetry.

Certainly, 20th c. poetry is no simple read especially as many students are ill equiped with the necessary linguistic, sociolinguistic and cognitive tools to overcome the capricious nature of this kind of poetry. Despite being well established in socio-cultural life traditional and modern societies, poetry materials (*namely*, books) appear to be missing in the students' surroundings. Womser and Cappella validate ''There is no poetry (particularly contemporary poetry) in students' homes'' (*op.cit.*: ix). I can put claim that this is an accurate observation not only concerning students, but also of a good number of people ; the latter oftentimes prove to be interested in films and/ or novels.

3. Emergengence of Contemporary Poetry

The 20th c. has been a blessing in disguise for the society and its intellectual *élite*. True enough, technological breakthroughs and the development of transportation means as well as as the accessibility to media gave the impression that world turned into a better place. The real weight of the iceberg lies in the frozen depth of the ocean : imperialism, conflicts of economic interests, balance of powers, *lebensraum* (vital space) skirmishes, trade privileges, maritime hegemony all led to severe consequences. The world that seemed a better place turned into world of bloody and oftentimes ruthless extermination of the human race. The sea-changes witnessed around the globe regurgirated tha ills of societies in great troubles and perils concerning their very existence.

Race supremacy ravaged the western world ; economic and trade capitalized on the defenseless ; territorial gains acquired oftentimes with a great deal of the suffering ; *parvenu* societies started to expand at the detriment of conservative old ones and finally a new sensational media that made the world look irrationally ''rosy''. The most devastating events, however, were the world wars which upset the sleep of the all the values however marginal they were. In an attempt to make sense of the rapid and often painful change in society, the intellectual élite, more than anyone else, felt that society was in a great danger. Their literary production started to reflect that frustration and in the process, they produced a new type of poetry. Poetry that was revolutionary in that it reflected faithfully the broken and fragmented picture of the world.

These socio-historical and socio-political events appear so influential in the emergence of a new form of poetry that feels disturbed by the direct scorn of the values. Womser and Cappella conclude that ''it seems a tenable generalization to say that the work of American 20th c. poetry has been to honor the fragments of the century's damnable wars, its race hatreds and genecides, its belittlement of the value of the individual life'' (*op.cit.*: xvii). All in all, modern poetry mirrors the ugliness of the human nature in language and form that faithfully reflect those horrid man-made events.

4. Manifestations of 20th c. Poetry

Perhaps no one expressed the personality and sensitivity of modern poets than T. S. Eliot. He clearly, directly and soberly frames that

''Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from thses things''. The detachment expressed above shows to what wanted to get rid of those either dwarfish and/ or titanic garments they made to bear. The corollary of that was that modern poets bore the brunt and their crosses and launched their own messianic campains to denounce the ails that society felt complacent to voice any criticism against them.

It is worth of note to point out that modern poets face a challenge: to balance their being humans and poets in a world that defines itself in unpoetic terms. In the book *Modern Poetry*, the author (nn) argues that

> The poet is the spokesman, making statements or incantations on behalf of himself or others_ usually for both, for it is difficult to speak for oneself without speaking for others or to speak for others without speaking for oneself. The poet, therefore, in a sense is a man at his most self-conscious, but this means consciousness of himself as man, not consciousness of himself as poet. Poets for more than a hundred years now have been suffering from latter kind of self-consciousness. They have have felt that their expressed attitude to the world must be particularly the attitude of poets, that therefore much of the world was unfit subject for poetry because it was itself unpoet *(p. 1)*.

This suffering, alienation, frustration, and disillusionment of the modern poets are processed in that kind of poetry that denounces these contradictions and paradoxes.

For the sake of making the materials student-friendly and less esoteric and/ or parochial, the concepts will be explored without the controvercies that followed their promulgation. The following features of 20th c. poetry are by no means exhaustive ; they are purposefully dealt with in generic terms.

Intertexuality

By definition, an intertext is the text (from one work) that apposites a larger literary text (from another). Differently couched, intertextuality is a deliberate, extensive inclusion of a text within the texture of another. Julia Kristiva, who coined the term intertextually, defines the

concept as: ''Tout texte se construit comme une mosaïque de citations, tout texte est absorption et transformation d'un autre texte''. Basically, modern texts are nothing but a patchy work of other works which ovelap and incessantly interact to generate a ''new'' text. As a final comment, authenticity of recently produced texts is by no means detracted because of the overlapping of other texts ; rather, the smooth absorption of previous texts authenticizes them.

Kristiva (1969, cited in Eigeldinger 1987: 10) identifies intertextuality ''Le texte est donc une productivité, (…) il est une permutation de textes, une intertextualité: dans l'espace d'un texte plusieures énoncés, pris à d'autres textes, se croisent et se neutalisent''. In other terms, intertextuality attests to be the process by which a poet, whether deliberately or otherwise, incorporates previous texts (written by him or other poets) to produce new texts. In wide brief, modern texts are in essence a colorful hybrid of different texts and the harmony in the interaction (or lack thereof) that defines its originality. T. S. Eliot, the most influential of the 20th c. poets, ironically quips ''immature poets imitate; mature poets steal !''. That proves that the authenticity of the 20thc. poetry lies in its ''borrowings'', which add to its colorfulness and richness and makes it worth studying.

The intertext feature of 20th c. poetry is indelible and needs to be introduced to English language learners (ELLs) even when they are unitiated to assist them understand and enjoy it. According to Worton and Still (1991: 56) ''An intetext is one or more texts which the reader must know in order to understand a work of literature in terms of its overall significance (as opposed to he discrete meanings of its successive words, phrases, and sentences''. Singling out intertextuality discloses the hidden messages and helps unitiated ELLs grasp the ''far-fetched'' symbols, meanings, and signs that characterize 20th c. poetry. A textbook case example of intertexuality is T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*, which contains ''hybrid'' texts.

> What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
> Out of this stony rubbish ? Son of man,
> You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
> A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
> And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
> And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
> There is shadow under this red rock,
> (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),

And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.
Frisch weht der Wind
Der Heimat zu,
Mein Irisch Kind,
Wo weilest du?
"You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
They called me the hyacinth girl."

5. Fragmented Imagery

20th c. poets perceived the world in a fragmented fashion ; on score of that they tailored that poetry to reflect just that W.B. Yeats in ''The Second Coming'' clearly describes in a series of fragmented pictures how the world is broken down into incoherent icons: a falcon which cannot hear its master and keeps turning in the sky; things collapse in shambles; anarchy is prevailing everywhere; the seas turn red as if rivers were filled with dead bodies and driven all along to once blue seas; innocence ends up drowned in the red seas and finally only villains are listened to, while honest people are deliberately ignored.

> **THE SECOND COMING**
> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.

6. Discription of Ugliness

Ugliness is usually understood to be the opposite of beauty- what is agreeable, attractive and appealing. The depiction of sordid, ugly scenes of modern cities is a *leitmotif*, a recurring theme, that oftentimes comes at the fore of 20th c. poetry. In *Literature and the American Urban Experience*, Jaye and Chalmers Watts (1981: 45) note '' … ever since the industrial revolution, the poets, instead of regarding the cities as cities of civilization, have regarded them as

destructive of the conditions out of which the supreme achievements of poetry in the past were created''. This may account for the 20th c. poets resort to tailor their creative talent to the ugliness that they see and feel around them. This attitude may a psychological reaction to an otherwise cruel world. Beautiful imagery appears to be the last thing a modern poet seeks. Rather, the atmosphere in which ugly things occur is probably a modern poet desperately seeks and wants to recreate in the minds of his audience. By way of an illustration, we shall examine T. S. Eliot's *Prelude*s, which appears to sum up the aforementioned claims :

> The winter evening settles down
> With smell of steaks in passageways.
> Six o'clock.
> The burnt-out ends of smoky days.
> And now a gusty shower wraps
> The grimy scraps
> Of withered leaves about your feet
> And newspapers from vacant lots;
> The showers beat

The poet attempts to portray a good instance of a sordid place in a modern world where the feelings of loneliness, disgust, sordidness wraps the poets. The poem clearly depicts a sordid street in a city ; it also conveys a mood of boredom and pessimism. Oser (1998 : 11) corroborates '' … the poem is deliberately unprettified, mimetically contorted, and spiritully abnormal''. The theme of the poem is even more appalling when we consider the date wherein it was written, 1917. It was the middle year of a catastrophic world war in which all the human genius was used to bring disaster and death. 20th c. poets started questioning the values of western civilization, especially as the horrors of the wars came to be taped on films and presented to the public. The sense of mission, therefore, that had been attributed to the western civilization, democracy, freedom, equality, and justice was demaged beyond repair. Eliot's *Preludes* fall within the framework of a general critique of the meaning and direction of the values so much cherished in the western world. According to Bush (1991: 75), the Preludes were ''were originally set in Boston's Dorchester and Roxbury, evoke the modern daily grind that reduces people to robots, slaves of the Industrial City of Matter''. It may seem ironical that modern man feels that he has become a total stranger, an alien, in his

seemingly known surroundings.

7. Frustration and Disillusionment

The contingency of wars, economic crises, the rise of fascism and communism, and the appearance of the cinema, cars, electricity, radio, and competition were more than what the creative minds of the poets could bear. So many changes in very few years. To make bad things worse, all of the human achievements and the human socio-polical environment were antagonistic. Pradoxically, democracy brought Nazism, Fascism, and anarchy. Wars brought breakthroughs in technology and medecine but only to destroy the other humans. The cinema industry brought a new class of VIP whose main interests were fashionable clothes, jewelery, and fancy cars. Free enterprise brought economic depressions that were so severe that people could not find any jobs to support their families (*viz.*, the Great Depression). This antagonism led to the crippling feelings of frustration and disillusionment. T.S. Eliot

> April is the cruellest month, breeding
>   Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
>   Memory and desire, stirring
>   Dull roots with spring rain.
>   Winter kept us warm, covering
>   Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
>   A little life with dried tubers.

8. Allusion

Allusion refers to a brief, implicit reference to a person, event, and/or object. In other terms, allusion may be understood to be a short, deliberate borrowing from other poets and/ or works. According to Gregory (1996 : 2) ''Up untill the modernist moment, allusion was the preferred and time-honored mode of intertextual reference in poetry ; quotation appeared only rarely''. Pound in lines 36-44 of Canto XXX alludes to Borgia's marriage.

> Came Madam 'Yle
>   Clothed with the light of the altar
>   And with the price of the candles.
>   "Honour? Balls for yr honour!
>   Take two million and swallow it."
>   Is come Messire Alfonso
>   And is departed by boat for Ferrara
>   And has passed here without saying 'O'.

9. **Student-Friendly 20th c. Poetry**

Teaching and understanding 20th c. poetry is arguably a daunting undertaking, particularly for (novice) teachers. Showalter (2003: viii) claims that ''teaching literature in the 21st c. will be demanding more flexibility and less specialization''. Differently stated, teaching effectively literature needs to be carried out by teachers using different materials and pedagogical supports, not by literary critics whose approaches may are not meant for pedagogical purposes. A casual survey of the teachers of literature will come to the following attitude: Ideal settings with an audience with exceptional skill in perceiving the subtle meanings of an otherwise complex poetry seem to be *sine qua non*. At least, this is the attitude of most people whose engagement in literature; this is more salient in settings where the literature being taught is carried out in a foreign language.

Teachers of literature in non-native settings, need to bear in mind that they are dealing with students whose knowledge of the foreign language is limited beside their not being particularly interested in what they learn, especially when it comes to a subject that challenges their intelligence. Kravis (1995: 8) notes that ''the reality for most teachers is that they are introducing books to people who are not attracted by books''. Teachers primary concern should focus on involving students in approaching modern poetry from different perspectives. The following strategies can be very engaging if judiciously utilized and periodically evaluated.

1. **Befriending poets** : The focus will be on their psyche and creative talents rather than mere dates in their biographies. ELLs need to identify themselves with 20th c. poets to be able to understand they way that they compose poetry. It should be noted that most 20th c. poets are shy and they reveal themselves through their broken verses rather than threir broken voices. On that score, students should be made aware that 20th c. poets try to confide in them through poetry ; they need to be good listeners.

2. **Approaching 20th c. poetry** : 20th c. poetry needs to be introduced independently from traditional poetry. The types of analyzing questions should focus on what the poets wants to convey not the beauty and harmony of sounds and imagery.

3. **Using multimedia resources** : Multimedia resources provide the teachers with innumerable opportunities to meet their students' learning styles.

4. **Open discussion conferences and workshops** : Modern poetry should not be approached as an end in themselves, but a springboard to understand modern societies and the challenges of our times. Students need be encouraged to engage in workshop activities.

5. **Write music for 20th c. poems :** Students can use the soundtrack of different modern songs (say, *My Heart Will Go On*) and sing individually or in choir the poem under study.

6. **Paint/ Draw the poetic images :** 20th c. poetry proves to be a rich area of images, which students may try to paint and/ or draw. This activity may help unitiated ELLs visualize what poets try to point out to.

7. **Writing papers** : Students should be encouraged to express themselves independently from their teachers by approaching modern poetry creatively.

 A Case in Point : Yeats' *The Second Coming*

To introduce Yeats to third year students was by no means an easy undertaking for any FL teacher as most FL learners have not yet acquired and mastered the language in question and its cultural and pragmatic implications. To overcome those obstacles, I had to capitalize on the rich vein of contemporary poetry on images. Imagery proved to be the key that enabled free access to free verse poetry.

Step ≠ 1 (Warming Up) : As a warming up activity, I asked my students to ponder on Nizzar Qabbani's famous stanza (The blue wave in your eyes/ Calls me to the inner depths/ And I have no experience in love/ Nor do I have a *felucca*). All of the students appeared to appreciate the image of the blue wave in someone' eyes but failed to understand that the beloved had blue eyes not untill I drew the picture of an eye and colored the iris in blue. The students were euphoric when they had been able to understand the underlying reference.

Step ≠ 2 (Silent Reading) : The positive response bolded me to undertake Yeats's *The Second Coming* poem. After a brief biographical introduction, the students were requested to start reading silently the poem. The first reading did not help the students to understand what the poet was referring to although the brief discussing touched upon the Irish Civil War and all that war left behind (viz., it claimed more casualties than the War of Independence).

Step ≠ 3 (Deconstruction of the Poem) : The artistic strategy stepped in to solve the problem : The students were requested to

identify the images that characterize the first and the second stanzas. Once done, the teacher handed out black and white drawings of the images and requested studnts to color them according to the descriptions of the poet. Afterwards, each imagery was discussed with a special reference to its culure and history (i.e., falconary) and mythical creatures (i.e., The Sphinx).

Step ≠ 4 (Reading with a Soundtrack) : For more appreciation of the poem, a soundtrack (Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust*/*The Hungarian March* saved on a USB and inserted in a laptop equipped with high speakers turned low for the occasion), and the teacher started reading trying to follow the sounds of the soundtrack. Studebt reacted positively to the thetrical reading-music combination. And, that was more than the teacher bargained for : The students were truly thrilled and later requested (by the teacher) to imitate (and why not emulate) the teacher's reading.

Step ≠ 5 (Task Project) : Students were requested to read a contemporary and/ or modernist poet of their own choosing and approach it artistically (drawings and music) in the sessions to come.

Conclusion

Teaching literature in general and modern poetry in particular is a frustrating task for most teachers. Frustration stems from their being introducing subjects to students who lack the motive and skill to appreciate an otherwise different but practical poetry. By diversifying teachers' approaches to teaching poetry and meaningfully engaging students by leading them to understand the multifarious aspects of modern poetry, English language learners will be more amenable to undertake *autonomous* and *self-driven* readings of 20th c. poetry. As a final recommendtion, 20th c. poetry need not be juxtaposed to traditional poetry, nor should it be approached in the same way.

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