

## **In Living Memory: The Dying Art of Learning Poetry and a Case for Revival**

Debbie Pullinger

*Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK*

dp371@cam.ac.uk

University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, 184 Hills Road, Cambridge, CB2 8PQ

Debbie Pullinger is a researcher on the Poetry Teaching Research Project, with David Whitley, at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, where she is also undertaking ESRC-funded doctoral research on the aesthetics of poetry for children and its theoretical relationship to the wider field of children's literature.

## **In Living Memory: The Dying Art of Learning Poetry and a Case for Revival**

This article considers the practice of learning poems and the value of poetry in the memory, and precipitates from the Cambridge Poetry Teaching Project, a small-scale research study co-ordinated through the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge. Drawing on the subset of findings in relation to learning and memory, it locates the practice within broader cultural and educational contexts, and examines it in relation to some theories of memory and cognition, especially the work of Iain McGilchrist (2009) on the divided brain, and to personal experience. It argues that there is a largely forgotten value in learning poetry, and posits five ways in which it may contribute both to our experience and understanding of the poem and to our engagement with the world. Finally, it considers the learning process itself, and suggests a strategy in accordance with the proposed theorisation.

Keywords: poetry, memory, English curriculum

### **Introduction**

‘Learning poetry has gone out of fashion.’ So said two teachers in our recent research project on perceptions of teaching poetry, encapsulating a view shared by many of the participants, and perhaps hinting that the practice has disappeared for reasons that may not be fully understood.

Over ten years ago, two LEA-wide surveys (Carter 1998) found that knowledge of poetry was developed through listening, speaking, writing, discussing and performing – but not memorising. Though no studies since have investigated the matter specifically, there is nothing in the literature to indicate any significant change in this situation. In the UK we now have an education system that offers neither an inscribed curricular place nor a hospitable space for poetry learning. In our own small-scale, local study, we did not set out to research the place of memorisation in particular, but to investigate perceptions of poetry teaching across all phases of the education system, from primary schools through to higher education and teacher-training courses. Through 18 semi-structured interviews with teachers and lecturers, we explored pedagogical, institutional and cultural issues – all of which touched on their attitudes to and personal experience of learning poetry, and whether and how it was incorporated into their own practice. Our purposive sampling meant that all our participants had a keen interest in and commitment to poetry, and were thus – we reasoned – well placed to offer a critique of the progression of knowledge and understanding in poetry, to make a fair assessment of institutional and curriculum pressures, and to engage in the process of reflection.

My aim here is to explore some ideas about poetry in the memory, drawing on a subset of our findings and relating them to broader cultural and educational contexts, to

some theories of memory and cognition, especially the work of Iain McGilchrist (2009) on the divided brain, and to personal experience. In particular, I want to think about the questions: what might be the value in learning poetry? And if it does have value, what kind of approaches would be most effective?

Perhaps learning poetry no longer matters as it once did. Now that we can summon any one of a thousand poems on a tablet or smartphone and have it on screen in seconds, the idea of keeping a small stock of sonnets in our head seems, on the face of it, rather pointless. Questions about the value of poetry learning can therefore be located within the wider context of the enormous changes being wrought by technology at every level of human existence: changes to the ways in which we perceive, think and interact with the world, including the ‘outsourcing’ of memory.

### **The history of memorisation**

In ancient Greece, *mousike* referred to music, dance and poetry, all of which were closely connected with the preservation of wisdom. In that pre-literate culture, the Greeks would memorise and recite quantities of material that most people today would find incredible and intimidating (Wolf 2008). But having texts in the memory was seen as important not only for transmission to the next generation, but also for 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; by contrast he regarded their graphic counterparts as dead words that ‘only go on telling you the same thing’ (Wolf 2008, p. 76). Beneath these ostensibly fanciful notions lies an important point: a word on the page is fixed in line, 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.

Socrates was asserting the superiority of oral texts over written ones at a time before literacy had taken hold and, Wolf suggests, before its peculiar advantages had become apparent. And though it may be argued that once written texts did become available they were neither plentiful nor very accessible for a long time, memorisation persisted not simply for preservation nor for convenience, but as a means to personal knowledge. Renaissance scholars would transcribe excerpts from their reading into a commonplace book whose contents, as documented by Anne Moss (1996), would be revisited, rehearsed and committed to memory. These books were thus instrumental in the synthesis that produced understanding, intellectual development and – ultimately – invention. Eminent scholars of the period, including Erasmus and Francis Bacon, wrote detailed instructions on a practice that, far from being mechanical, demanded engagement, creativity and judgement. Shakespeare was in part the product of this memorising culture; Michael Wood (2001) suggests that the swathes of literature he learned by heart contributed significantly to his sense of poetry and his general feel for language, as well as bestowing an abundance of imaginative resources in the form of myths and stories.

The commonplace book eventually became, as it were, less commonplace, but memorisation of texts, including poetry, persisted for a few centuries. In the twentieth century, however, as education became more child-centred and as texts of all types became steadily more ubiquitous and accessible, the practice came to be regarded as redundant and unenlightened. The decline of poetry learning over one generation is reflected in our research findings: nine of our participants recalled learning poetry as children; only four did it with their students.

Our participants' views on the value of memorising poetry ranged across a broad spectrum, from those who believed passionately in its benefits to those who felt it would simply distract from the business of analysing and understanding, or, worse, 'kill off enthusiasm'. And this spread was reflected in reported practice. Around a third had occasionally asked students to learn a poem and four did so regularly, but for different purposes at different phases: at primary it was for performance; at secondary it was not 'for' any purpose, other than the intrinsic reward of having learned a poem; in higher education it was primarily in order to facilitate a recitation, which the English tutor felt offered a preferable quality of reading, as compared with a reading from the page. And regardless of their attitude to poetry learning, several teachers observed that poems or portions of poems are often learned effortlessly and incidentally, whether through repeated hearing and joining in (primary) or through study (secondary).

### **What happens when we learn poetry?**

Given the nature of our sample, it seems likely that poetry learning is even less prevalent in the education system as a whole, and that it survives only in pockets. But does that really matter? Some of our teachers felt that such learning calls for 'a different space' – so is it worth the cost in time and attention? Some thought it could put some students off poetry completely – so is it worth the risk? And in any case poetry is increasingly available on finger tap – so is it worth the mental exertion? Most things that we purposely commit to memory (multiplication tables, lines in a play, the meanings of road signs) have a clear and specific purpose (to do mental arithmetic, to perform on stage, to keep ourselves and others 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 the possibility of being able to recite the lines without looking at the page. However, I shall now consider five ways in which a poem in the memory is very different from a poem on the page, and thence five reasons why learning poetry may be worthwhile.

#### ***1 Availability***

The poet Charles Causley 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.' (Causley 1966, p. 91) This unfolding may be elicited by rereading the poem on the page – when the page is to hand. But words on the page are not available to our mental processes with the same speed and convenience. A poem in the head, on the other hand, is ready for the opportune moment. As the scholars of the Renaissance knew, the

extraordinary resources of the mind are continually available to internalised words, offering possible connections and associations, often subtle and imaginative rather than obvious or logical.

The process also works in the other direction since the poem in the head is continually available to enrich our understanding of our inner and outer worlds. Listening to Ted Hughes' 'Wind' myself as a twelve-year-old, I was transported into that house 'far out at sea' and was struck for the first time by the power of poetic images to call something quite ordinary from personal experience and re-present it with fresh life and meaning. 'The wind flung a magpie away' conjured an image that lodged itself, along with the line, in my mind, and even now whenever I see a struggling bird on a blustery day the words speak themselves from the depths.

For two exceptional participants who had learned vast amounts of poetry, it was 'something that keeps me ticking over' [H] and 'a fantastic emotional resource' [P].<sup>1</sup> It is tempting to read 'emotional resource' in terms of the more extreme emotions, and so to see poetry simply as a source of comfort in distress or an articulation of joy in celebration – and it is well able to supply both of these, hence the popularity of poems at weddings and funerals. But these individuals appeared to be speaking of something both broader and deeper. For any type of human experience, they seemed to be saying, poetry offers that experience back to us in ways that clarify our understanding. Or perhaps this is just to restate Aristotle's theory, that *mousike* (music and poetry) brings about *catharsis*. Though the precise meaning of the word has been debated, and though popularly interpreted as 'purgation', a well supported alternative (e.g. Nussbaum 1986) is that it consists in a training or calibration of the emotions.

## ***2 Authentic familiarity***

But could familiarity with learned poetry breed, if not contempt, then at least boredom and indifference? This was one source of teachers' concern about memorisation. Indeed, books, pieces of music, paintings and poems may become so familiar that we no longer appreciate their meaning or aesthetic qualities. But equally, some works of art and of nature seem to pass through the slough of familiarity to emerge revitalised, as if encountered for the first time. This ability to see things afresh is one of the special talents of the poet, and precisely what Wordsworth sought to impart as he proposed 'to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom' (Coleridge 1817, p. 2).

Familiarity has the potential to breed contempt not only axiomatically, but also – it turns out – neurologically. Neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist explains that whereas new experience and information are processed by the right cerebral hemisphere, things that

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<sup>1</sup> The institutional phase in which the quoted participant primarily works is denoted: P –

Primary; S – Secondary; H – Higher Education; T – Teacher Education

have become familiar get passed across, so to speak, to the left, where they become abstracted and lifeless.<sup>2</sup> But the process is reversible; things may also pass the other way, to be experienced anew. ‘Newness,’ says McGilchrist, ‘... in one sense is precisely the return from left-hemisphere familiarity to right-hemisphere familiarity, from inauthenticity to authenticity’. But how do we pass from the one to the other? How to enter into that awakened state? ‘It cannot be willed, though it might be much desired,’ he says, but it may be attained by ‘an (apparently passive) openness to whatever is’ (McGilchrist 2009, p. 173). He suggests, therefore, that each hemisphere has its own version of familiarity: that of the left is what happens, for example, with a piece of music heard repeatedly but passively; that of the right is what comes to musicians who play a piece of music until they feel it has become part of them, until it really starts to live.

The view of some poets, such as Basil Bunting, is that ‘poetry lies dead on the page, until some voice brings it to life, just as music, on the stave, is no more than instructions to the player.’ (Bunting 1966, p. 80). This aligns with the view from a poetics perspective, that regards the text ‘as an *instrument*, a scripted means by which the reader performs a particular action’ (Collins 1991, p. ix). But what if, like the musicians, we allow the music of the poem to come from within rather than without? If we truly ‘perform’ it, do we achieve that authentic familiarity? We do, says one writer, Nick Seddon (2006), who decided to learn 100 poems in a year and found that ‘memorising *revives things that have become stale or deadened*’ (italics mine). He describes how Shakespeare’s sonnets, once committed to memory, ‘unfurl and display their self-delighting inventiveness: time and again, walking down the street, I have little insights and epiphanies.’ Notably, his will was engaged not in the intellectual effort to understand but in the effort to learn; then the poems seemed to take on a life of their own, to ‘unfurl’ and ‘display’. When we reach a state of openness through memorisation, meaning may be made with apparent ease.

### ***3 Personal knowledge***

‘When children learn poetry, they are learning in a different way,’ said one of our poetry-learning aficionados. 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. Essentially, this knowledge –

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<sup>2</sup> Whilst eschewing the reduced, traduced versions of cerebral hemispheric difference in the brain, and whilst insisting that both sides are fully involved in everything we do, Iain McGilchrist (2009) gives a compelling account of how the right and left hemispheres each have a very different disposition towards the world that affects our understanding of everything in it, including ourselves.

which aligns closely with what has been theorised as *tacit knowledge* (Polanyi 1958), *participant knowledge* (Barfield 1928) and *Enjoyment* (Alexander 1920)<sup>3</sup> – is acquired not by looking objectively, from the outside, but subjectively, from within. And this epistemological distinction, too, turns out to have a neurological basis: facts and conceptual categories are the domain of the left hemisphere whilst holistic, complex, personal knowledge is the domain of the right. Whereas the left hemisphere is concerned with man-made objects and sees only an agglomeration of part, the right hemisphere has a concern with living things that flows naturally from its interest in whatever exists apart from ourselves and its capacity for empathy. It follows therefore that our encounters with other people come to us through our right cerebral hemisphere. More surprising, however, is the fact that our encounters with works of art also come to us through this channel. In other words, the way we experience a symphony, painting or poem is far more like the way we experience another person than the way we experience non-living objects, so that ‘such living creations are seen as being essentially human in nature’ (McGilchrist 2009, p. 96). In contrast with the objective, reductive mode of enlightenment-style reason, this kind of knowledge is acquired by entering into a relationship with the subject of our knowing. For paintings and poems – as with persons – an element of trust and commitment is *sine qua non*. So though we may enter a poem to a certain extent each time we read it, there may be a sense in which we may fully inhabit it only if we allow it to inhabit and in-form us.

But what if the poem is forgotten? Some participants said that they learned swathes of poetry as children that they cannot now remember, so is the point lost along with the poems? Possibly not.

First, we know that some problems of memory are problems of retrieval rather than storage. Memory research finds that people may demonstrate evidence of information in the memory, even if they cannot recall it. (Foster 2009). So if we cannot call all the lines of a poem to the conscious mind, this does not necessarily mean they have been expunged from memory. Retrieval – a complex process – may be available at the level of recognition (encountering the poem), or recall may be improved by certain cues or context. Second, even if the memory of the words has decayed, structures, rhythms and cadences, and images may remain subconsciously embedded. I myself learned a lot of poetry as a child, much of which seems to have vanished from memory. But I do possess an acute sense of rhythm and metre in the spoken word, and that I suspect comes from the patterns imprinted early in my mind. Since 99 per cent of our brain is given over to unconscious thought processes, we continuously take decisions, solve problems and so on, without any conscious involvement. So whether we have

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<sup>3</sup> This distinction, though 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.

retained odd lines or faint echoes of rhythm, we do not necessarily need conscious access in order for these fragments to be active in our inner lives.

#### ***4 Imitation***

Poets have always memorised the work of other poets; Ted Hughes, for example, had learned the entire poetical works of W.B. Yeats by the time he was twenty-one. But how does it help poets, or indeed anyone, when it comes to finding linguistic form for ideas? Imitation used to be a highly regarded path to knowledge and mastery in all the arts, and still is in Eastern culture. But in a Western culture that prizes individuality and ‘self-expression’, it has fallen from educational favour. McGilchrist, however, draws a vital distinction between imitation and copying, again derived from the differing dispositions of the two cerebral hemispheres: copying, a left-hemisphere-based process, is a mechanical reproduction consisting in disembodied procedures; imitation, the most innate and natural of human behaviours and based in the right hemisphere, is ‘an imaginative inhabiting of the other’ and ‘a process ... of intention, aspiration, attraction and empathy’ (McGilchrist 2009, p. 249). And this kind of imitation, paradoxically, gives rise to individuality.

Such imitation is surely what is afforded by memorisation. When we read a poem, we perform a complex set of operations that allows us simultaneously to assume a number of subject positions that include the fictive addresser and addressee of a text, but in doing so we never deny the ‘real me’ – to whom all other positions are relative (Collins 1991). In other words, we use our own internal voice to impersonate the voice of the speaker. But when we recite a learned poem, aloud or internally, the words are offered to our voices (actual or internal) not from the page and thus from working memory, but from a deeper place (in our long-term memory). They are offered, as it were, from a part of ourselves.

#### ***5 Ownership***

When we are able to recite a poem, then, we enter into it more fully through our imitation of the poet’s voice. And there was a strong sense amongst our participants that the poem in the memory is possessed (or perhaps possesses us) in a different way. ‘I do think that remembering the words is kind of owning the words,’ said one. Indeed, in purely motivational 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. Being able to enunciate its every syllable, we are likely to have a sense of mastery over it. But there is a further reason why memorising poetry could facilitate a helpful sense of ownership.

Poetry is essentially rooted in the body, arguably more than other literary forms. A defining characteristic is that it works with the musical and metaphorical aspects of

language<sup>4</sup> – and there is now good evidence that in evolutionary terms the roots of language are music and metaphor, emanating from the body (McGilchrist 2009). This corporeal aspect comes into play whenever a poem is read, but the relationship must surely take on a different aspect when the poem is in the memory. 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'.<sup>5</sup>

Whilst ownership of individual poems and poetry in general appeared to be strengthened by memorisation, it was also clear that for many participants, love of poetry was instigated by a parent or teacher, as here:

My father ... where most of my enthusiasm for poetry came from, had hundreds of poems in his head, hundreds and hundreds ... [H]

This experience was fairly typical in that the parent was a father,<sup>6</sup> and in that the poems were recited from memory. And as for many of the interviewees, teaching poetry was therefore about handing something on to the next generation. Thus, our overall impression was that poetry is something that has to be transmitted *in vivo*.

Ownership, then, does not mean sole possession but a shared custody. When we learn poetry, we enter a community that crosses geographical and historical boundaries. A young child who learns a nursery rhyme immediately takes her place in a stream that stretches back to ancient times, where sounds and images, melodies and harmonies, rhythm and rhyme, flow from one generation to the next.

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To sum up, poetry in the memory:

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<sup>4</sup> This idea of a duality as a defining characteristic has been repeated over centuries, and perhaps most succinctly by Martin Heidegger when he said that 'Singing and thinking are the stems neighbor to poetry'. Heidegger, M. 1971. *Poetry, language, thought*. New York: Harper Row.

<sup>5</sup> *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act V, Scene 1, line 14, Shakespeare, W. 2007. Ed. Bate, J and Rasmussen, E. *William Shakespeare: The complete works*. London: Macmillan.

<sup>6</sup> This was a small sample so we make no claims for generalisability, but it was interesting that of the five who mentioned a parent reciting poetry, four were referring to fathers.

- makes both poem and memory continually available to each other for mutual elucidation in a way that the most searchable, accessible, personalised outsourced memory cannot begin to match;
- becomes available to the patient attention that enables us to move through the words into what is beyond the words;
- is an act of trust and commitment that yields a different kind of knowledge;
- affords a form of imitation that both enables us to imaginatively to inhabit the world of another person and to develop our sense of self;
- affords a strong sense of ownership that facilitates understanding of individual poems, a love of poetry in general, and a shared cultural understanding.

### **How should poetry be learned?**

What is the best way to learn poetry? Even the few teachers who incorporated some intentional poetry learning into their practice did not talk about memorisation strategies with their students. But if we *were* to decide that learning poetry was beneficial and something to be encouraged, especially for young people, then we should perhaps seek some understanding of the process so that we have some idea of what works.

### ***By rote or by heart?***

The expressions ‘by rote’ and ‘by heart’ cropped up regularly in our interviews: the former mostly used pejoratively to denote a mechanical, ‘parrot-fashion’ type of learning; the latter to indicate a more organic, meaningful and often less purposive process. The origins of ‘rote’ are slightly obscure, but probably lie in the Latin *rota*, ‘wheel’, which conveys the sense both of a mechanistic process and of something being cycled round and round. ‘By heart’, on the other hand, derives from the Greeks, who believed that the heart was the vital core of a person. So the general usage falls in with the etymology.

Tidy as this may appear, the distinction is not straightforward. Poems learned in a mechanistic way sometimes endure in the memory nevertheless, perhaps eventually to unfold their meaning; conversely, lines heavy with personal significance may enter the memory with relative ease, only to disappear relatively quickly. Writing about poetry teaching for secondary English specialists, Mike Fleming and David Stevens suggest that the contrast between the two types of learning is indeed often overemphasised: ‘surface acquaintance may be a first and necessary step en route to a deeper familiarity and response ... resonance of language can haunt us and continue to unfold before we grasp its meaning’ (Fleming and Stevens 2010, p. 168). Whilst there may be no clear distinction, and whilst there may well be a great deal of individual variation in the way that people learn poetry (we certainly noted differences between the reported experiences of auditory and visual learners, for example), we may observe that learning by rote, or in a fairly superficial way, certainly does not preclude the later development of understanding, as was the case with adult poetry-learner, Jim Holt:

The process of memorising a poem is fairly mechanical at first. You cling to the meter and rhyme scheme ... declaiming the lines in a sort of sing-songy way without worrying too much about what they mean. But then something organic starts to happen. (Holt 2009)

In any case, as noted previously, deeper understanding is also an outcome of learning. So memorisation and a developing understanding are mutually bolstering.

### ***What is the most effective way to learn poetry?***

Whilst it is reassuring to believe that poems learned by rote may eventually be known by heart, rote learning is not necessarily the most effective strategy. In fact psychologists say that whilst elaborative rehearsal helps with short-term memorisation, it is ineffective for the long-term. Something else is needed.

The ancient Greeks, for whom memorising was a sustaining element of culture, used image-based techniques – most famously the memory palace where items to be remembered were placed at various *loci* within a mental construction of a familiar site. Most modern mnemonic techniques employ some variation on this system, and can be reasonably effective, if cumbersome and also somewhat mechanistic in their way. Contemporary literature on learning and memory suggests that whether something is successfully committed to our memory depends heavily on the quality of what psychologists term ‘the learning episode’. Hence passive repetition is neither an efficient nor an effective way to learn a poem. There are, however, a number of conditions that will increase our chances of success. In summary, we are more likely to retain material when learning is intentional, when we pay close attention, when there is rich semantic processing and a wealth of association, and when we perceive that the material has personal relevance for us (Foster 2009). The Greek technique certainly fulfills the conditions of intention and attention as well as involving some semantic processing and association, but the processing and association are to some extent imposed upon the material rather than arising from it, and tend to prioritise the visual. Moreover, as discussed earlier, a poem is a complex work of art that we engage with in a holistic, relational way, via our right cerebral hemisphere, in the same way that we engage with other people: relationally, emotionally, accommodating complexity and even paradox, knowing more than we can tell. So we might conjecture that poetry learning would benefit from a similarly holistic approach that works in sympathy with our right-hemisphere ways of knowing.

Ted Hughes, who believed passionately in learning poetry, edited an anthology of poems for that very purpose: *By Heart*. In the introduction, he commends a development of the Greek system in which sequences of vivid mental images are closely linked with key words in the lines of the poem, but combined with attention to the musical patterns of sound (cued in by the key words) and with an awareness of ‘the vast system of root meanings and related associations, deep in the subsoil of psychological life’. These meanings are picked up by the aural memory, so that we should ‘not so much look at the words as listen for them – widely, deeply and keenly as

possible' (Hughes 1997, p. xv). This more integrated approach might be compared with the way that professional musicians memorise pieces for performance: they learn not only sequences of notes, but also formal structures, harmonic patterns and the position of the notation on the page, as well as rehearsing finger movements to build muscle memory. This is partly so that if one aspect fails under performance pressure then another can kick in, but it must surely create a more robust memory and intimate knowledge of the piece.

Hughes says that 'the whole point is to get the poem, by any means, fair or foul, into the head' and that 'after a few replays' the cartoon-like images will probably fall away as the words enter the long-term memory (Hughes 1997, p. xiii). Replays are indeed needed; and the memory literature points emphatically to the enhancing effects of carefully spaced study and spaced retrieval. And whatever method we use, there will almost certainly be some movement from surface to depth, from the head to the heart – or, perhaps, across the corpus callosum from left hemisphere to right.

### ***When should poetry be learned?***

Is learning poetry as child or adolescent different from learning as an adult? Participants with poems in their memories had mostly learned them early in life, and one who still made the effort to learn poems regularly said, 'they'll stick, but not like the ones that I learnt before I was twenty' [H]. And since memory research finds that events from the period between adolescence and early adulthood are disproportionately represented in recalled memory, there would seem to be good reason to make an early start. Equally, however, there is an increasing body of research indicating that the adult brain is more 'plastic' and therefore more able to acquire new skills than was previously believed (for an overview, see, e.g. Carr 2010). And as the two cited examples indicate, the rewards for adult poetry learners may have their own kind of richness.

### **Conclusion**

In our study, there were a small number of teachers who, though enthusiastic about poetry generally, were not convinced about the benefits of committing it to memory. In their view, it did not help students to analyse a poem and did not help them in exams. They may be at least partly right; such benefits as may be are generally longer-term; none are really testable. Poetry is resistant to schedules and timetables. But the few who were learning poetry with their students clearly felt that it offered a different sort of experience:

I am beginning to think that maybe actually there is sort of some value to it, certainly in terms of trying to get the students to really feel the rhythm and the cadence of a poem ... and really knowing it inside out. [S]

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