

Poetry in the English Language Classroom

—Experiments in Critical Reading—

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1. Introduction

The academic year that began in April 2020 (令和2年度) saw the introduction of a new English education curriculum in the School for General Education at Shinshu University. One of the courses in the newly designed curriculum was Critical Reading. This essay will be, in part, a reflection on one teacher's experiments with the development of teaching material to meet the challenges posed by this new course. More generally, it will also consider the value of studying literature—and poetry in particular—as an academic discipline in the university of the early twenty-first century.

The aims of the new Critical Reading course as defined by the syllabus are broadly to equip students with some of the more fundamental research skills they will need later in their academic careers. More precisely, the syllabus points out that to read 'critically' is to go beyond the usual requirements of translating and simply understanding a reading passage. It entails a more active kind of engagement with a text and the additional steps of analysis, interpretation and evaluation (分析・解釈・評価). The etymology of the term 'critical' lies in the Greek word for 'judge'. To examine a text 'critically' involves cognitive processes of discrimination and assessment, and above all a willingness to ask questions.

Curriculum designers and education ministries have, of course, insisted for decades that schools and universities should be encouraged and supported in the task of cultivating critical thinking skills in their students. Critical thinking is one of the key twenty-first-century 'competencies' in the *Cambridge Life Competencies Framework*, where it is defined as the ability to 'identify patterns and relationships, evaluate ideas and use these skills to solve problems'.¹ Policy initiatives to promote the teaching of critical thinking have become common throughout the world, even if there are also, undoubtedly, crucial issues relating to cultural difference which problematize the role that critical thinking can play in a country's educational system. It was noted some time ago that the set of cognitive skills referred to by

the term ‘critical thinking’ can be viewed as embedded in Western social practices.² Although there will be insufficient space to consider these questions here, they are clearly of particular importance in a country like Japan.

Questions of cultural difference notwithstanding, it is clear that there has been a growing recognition throughout educational systems of the importance of critical thinking and a sense that universities have an obligation to teach such skills because they are now one of the key desiderata which employers look for in university graduates.³ Above all, there is a sense that in a world characterized by accelerating technological change, in which it is difficult to predict which specific skills will retain their usefulness, the ability to think critically will be of fundamental value to workers who need to adapt throughout their careers to new demands. A not insignificant consequence of all this is that the acquisition of critical thinking skills has been frequently invoked as one of the principal benefits of studying the arts, and this has become a central argument in recent push-back against cuts in the funding of the humanities.

In this essay, I will consider how literary texts, and poetry in particular, offer opportunities for practicing certain kinds of analytical thinking, especially the discovery of connections. This will include intertextual connections, by which I mean the ways in which ideas can be generated, or meanings qualified, through the juxtaposition of different texts. Poetry, as I hope this article will show, is a quintessential medium for critical thinking because it is supremely a product of thinking critically. Despite T. S. Eliot’s much-quoted assertion that ‘genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood’, it is equally true that without being prepared to think critically one can barely claim to be able to read poetry at all.⁴ Chiefly, then, this essay is an attempt to explore some of the ways in which poetic texts encourage the practice of thinking critically and can thus serve as teaching materials for developing certain kinds of analytical skill. It is also, more simply, a record of ‘texts’ of various kinds that, over the past few years, I have thought interesting enough to be worth sharing with my students.

2. Where We Are

I chose to begin my Critical Reading course with *Where We Are*, a thirty-line poem by the American poet and novelist Stephen Dobyns. The poem’s six stanzas are a description in the present tense of a banquet and there is nothing in either the diction or syntax that makes this a particularly difficult poem to read. On the contrary, much of the pleasure afforded by the poem lies in its clarity and simplicity, in the calm, measured rhythm of its evocation of visual details. My students may not have been familiar with all of the poem’s vocabulary: the words ‘gravy’ and ‘pitchers (of wine)’ might have had them reaching for the dictionary, as might ‘twittering’ or ‘flits’, although the first of these ought to be easier to guess nowadays, and the various species of tree—‘spruce’, ‘maple’ and ‘birch’—referred to in the penultimate stanza. In most other respects, however, the poem should have been straightforward to read and

students were quickly able to engage with the imaginative work it asks of its reader as it conjures the animated scene of a long ‘hall’ with exposed roofbeams, lit by the blaze of a fire in the hearth and echoing with the sounds of conversation oiled by copious supplies of roast meat and wine.

We see a group of immensely self-satisfied men, indulging in the camaraderie of watching one another fill their own bellies. Whatever world they inhabit, whether it is medieval Europe or Middle Earth, it is in one in which this particular group of individuals feel secure in their possession of property, of power and, it is implied, of women too. Several students expressed bemusement at the line in which the poem’s ‘protagonist’, if we can think of him thus, squeezes the thigh of the woman sitting beside him. Undoubtedly, there were cultural differences in body language that prompted this question, but if we read critically, then the point must be to ask how this detail of narrative action fits with the poet’s purposes here. Indeed, this is the fundamental procedure, since critical reading entails knowing what questions to ask. In this case, the answer must have something to do with how the poet wants us to view this ‘man’. What kind of man is he? How is he being characterized? All this must be leading somewhere, even if the poem seems at first to refrain from any overt judgement.

At the beginning of the poem’s second stanza, the Brueghelian vision of communal gluttony is suddenly punctuated by an inexplicable event. Against the settled background of the banquet, a bird (‘perhaps / a swift’) enters through a window and flies the length of the room. Although it bears witness to the natural world outside the banqueting hall, the sudden intrusion of the swift is evidently a device contrived by the poet, an artifice. In its monochromatic singularity and the inscrutable purposefulness of its linear flight path it offers so striking a counterpoint to the gourmandizing below as to suggest that it must have a symbolic function, as birds, with their wide range of cultural associations, so often do. It seems almost to trigger an epiphany, if only the man could grasp its significance. Precisely what this significance might be is never explicitly revealed but the poem does, in its remarkable final stanza, spell out to us how to read the scene of the banquet as a whole.

[...] This is where we are in history—to think
the table will remain full; to think the forest will
remain where we have pushed it; to think our bubble of
good fortune will save us from the night [...]

We are likely to have felt perhaps that the poem was driving at something along these lines. But with Dobyns’s final stanza, the function of the banquet as metaphor has become clear.⁵ This makes the poem reassuringly transparent for readers with little experience in reading poetry in a foreign language. Few poems contain an auto-commentary as explicit and arresting as Dobyns appends here. There are also, however, numerous contrasts at the level of individual words and images that function like stitches in the tapestry of the thematic design. The verb ‘fill’, for example, that appears twice in the first stanza (‘fill their mouths / with

duck and roast pork, fill their cups from / pitchers of wine’) rhymes with the repeated ‘will’ of the coda. The sense of repletion conveyed in the first instance, the sense that human mouths are no different to ‘cups’ in their function as receptacles to be filled, is cancelled in the uncertainty of the future tenses. Whether things ‘will remain’ as we want them to or whether civilization’s protective ‘bubble [...] will save us’ is presented as a question that unravels the confident descriptive force of the present tense ‘fill’. The nervous energy of the bird’s flight path is amplified in the image of the river, the relentless pressure of the water threatening to dislodge or erode the rock in its path. While a similar juxtaposition perhaps emerges in the collision between the man’s aborted epiphany as he sees the bird and the flow of his companions’ conversation, their absorption in accounts of hunting and butchering larger animals a counterfoil to the fleeting passage of the bird. Migratory birds like swallows and swifts are often perhaps symbols of the transitory. Here, the bird and its relation to the banquet is an extrapolation of a comparison made by Bede, the Anglo-Saxon monk and saint of the seventh and eighth centuries, between a man’s life and the ‘swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter’s day’.⁶ This source text, though, need not be taken as placing constraints on how we decode the emblematic nature of Dobyns’s swift. To read critically is to seek to identify patterns of our own in the contrasts the poem suggests.

The class found it harder than I had anticipated to grasp the significance of the poem’s central metaphor, although there were students who wrote of how they shared the diners’ reluctance to acknowledge the fragility of their ‘good fortune’, as Dobyns puts it. Many students responded well to the descriptive quality of the writing and to the way the poet creates an atmosphere. Students wrote, for example, about how the evocation of the banquet enabled them to feel as if they were in the room with the other guests. They were equally impressed by the description of the autumnal sky and the ‘half moon [...] behind scattered clouds’. One student wrote about the cinematic quality of the swift’s flight ‘beneath the roofbeams, / as firelight flings its shadows against the ceiling’. There was an intense engagement, too, with the question of what the bird symbolized. Was it ‘freedom’ or ‘unlimited potential’? The poem was also read as an exploration of the contrast between human cruelty and the beauty of nature, or as an allegory of environmental degradation. A variation on this theme emerged in the sense that the poem was an exhortation to guard against the threat of humanity’s extinction.

3. ‘Only Connect’

In essence, perhaps all understanding is rooted in the discovery of connections, and so it was unsurprising that one process I found myself asking my students to engage with was that of drawing connections, often between things that seemed at first sight to be unrelated. An activity of this sort can often be framed in terms of seeking to compare and contrast.⁷ The

cognitive work of determining in what ways two pieces of writing are similar or divergent, is a fundamental way in which critical judgement can be exercised. This kind of practical criticism was also one which I remember as a common feature of my own education in school and in university, in the study of both poetry and art history. Poems and paintings were presented in pairs or groups in the hope that the juxtaposition might allow one to illuminate the other. How, to borrow an example from a recent exhibition, might the way we see Fra Angelico and Van Eyck change when these two painters' versions of *Saint Francis receiving the stigmata* are placed side by side?⁸ Because works of art, whether paintings or poems, are always products of a particular moment in history, criticism will often also undertake to identify echoes of earlier works. These can be direct or oblique, subtle allusions or explicit references. Are the two texts or images mere analogues or has one to some extent been the source of the other? The exercise can be equally stimulating in the complete absence of any historical dimension and offers the greatest challenge when the connections between the two texts are least apparent. It was in order to exploit this intertextual dimension of the critical approach to texts that I tried to assemble poems into groups. The first of these groups consisted of three poems: the song that Ariel sings to Ferdinand in the second scene of *The Tempest*, 'The Death by Water' section from T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* and a poem by Seamus Heaney.

The common theme that these three passages of poetry share is that of rebirth through water, and so in some sense they are also about death. It is between Shakespeare's song and the lines from *The Wasteland* that the thematic and intertextual connections emerge most clearly. In the play, the 'spirit' Ariel, at the bidding of his master Prospero, has conjured the illusion of a violent sea storm, using this as a device to convey the fleet of the King of Naples to the Mediterranean island on which the play's action takes place. Ferdinand, the King's son, has been isolated from the rest of the royal party and the invisible Ariel sings to confirm the prince's supposition that his father has been drowned at sea.

Full fathom five thy father lies,
 Of his bones are coral made:
 Those are pearls that were his eyes:
 Nothing of him that doth fade,
 But doth suffer a sea-change
 Into something rich and strange.
 Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:
 Ding-dong.
 Hark! Now I hear them: ding-dong, bell.

(from *The Tempest*, Act 1 Scene 2)⁹

Before being asked to explore the intertextual question, students were invited to focus on the formal constraints within which Shakespeare had chosen to work. This, it was hoped, would

prove to be an encouraging exercise since describing the rhyme scheme and even hearing the four stresses of the tetrameter lines are relatively straightforward tasks. Conversely, of course, there were also obstacles to understanding that needed to be overcome, not least in disentangling the ‘Nothing [...] that doth / But doth’ construction with its double negation. Once the difficulties of diction and syntax had been resolved, it was quite possible for students to appreciate the strange beauty of the song. They were responsive, for example, not only to the striking alliteration of the first line but also to the emotional effects of particular sounds. One student commented that the ‘f’ sounds of ‘full fathom five’ evoked the waves, while the clustering of ‘d’s in the final couplet suggested the depth and darkness of the sea. In general, there was an evident appreciation of the effects that Shakespeare achieves through rhyme and the patterning of sounds. It was difficult to fault the wonderful assessment of the poem as ‘fantastic and grave’, which succinctly captures the thematic tensions that make these lines so compelling.

The other crucial point that could be made to mitigate the alienating effect of a text that is four hundred years old was that the central concept of the ‘sea-change’ offers a remarkable example of how works of literature can contribute to a language’s expressive potential—and, of course, this is almost certainly more true of Shakespeare than of any other author in the English language. Using a standard dictionary, it is easy to show how the playwright’s coinage entered into the language to denote ‘a profound or notable transformation’.¹⁰ Without a knowledge of the term’s literary origins, it is impossible to know why ‘sea-change’ is used in the way it is. While it is presumably used all the time by people unfamiliar with its history, the meaning of ‘sea-change’ remains that of a transmutation as absolute as one in which bones are changed into coral and eyes into pearls.

The fate of the drowned Phoenician merchant Phlebas in ‘Death by Water’ is similarly a question of the physical matter of the body submitting to some mysterious process of transformation unfolding in the depths of the sea. Does Eliot have *The Tempest* in mind? Is this a reworking of Ariel’s song, a remaking of a poem all about something being remade? The connection is suggested as much by the differences as it is by any similarity between the two works. In Eliot’s lines, the rhyme words ‘swell’ and ‘fell’ (‘the deep sea swell [...] As he rose and fell’) and the precise rhythmical repetition suggest the movement of the sea, endless and monotonous. This is the sluggish, perpetual and mindless undulation of a shapeless mass that offers a sharp contrast to the presence of the ‘shapely’ sea-nymphs (in the sense at least that they possess corporeal forms), keeping their eye on the time and ringing their bells. Though the sense of time is far from absent in ‘Death by Water’, where the marvellous realm of coral and pearl is reinscribed into the merchant’s world of trade and finance, of ‘profit and loss’. In *The Tempest*, Alonso’s fleet is magically brought to Prospero’s island as his fleet is returning from Northern Africa, where the King has attended the marriage of his daughter Claribel to the King of Tunis, the city which, as Gonzalo reminds the King’s party, ‘was Carthage’ (Act 2, Scene 1, line 68). Eliot’s reader, in turn, might recall that Carthage was

established as a Phoenician colony, suggesting that the sea-change that ‘picked [Phlebas’s] bones in whispers’ has taken place in that same sea which Ariel falsely claims has turned Alonso’s bones to coral. Both the play and the poem can be read in the context of the Mediterranean trading relationships from which European civilization developed. It is the civilization that would also produce the plays of Shakespeare and which Eliot in *The Wasteland* is seeking to salvage in the aftermath of the Great War, by gathering together disparate texts and voices. ‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’, he famously declares near the poem’s end.

The third poem in the group was number xxv from the ‘Squarings’ sequence in Seamus Heaney’s collection of 1991, *Seeing Things*. This section consists of 48 twelve-line poems all of which contain four three-line stanzas. The twenty-fifth of these is also the first in the twelve-poem section entitled ‘Crossings’, implying a tension between the stability of a quadrilateral structure, of being ‘foursquare’, and a thematic concern with the transitional, with crossing over from one state to another.¹¹ Such questions concerned with the response to form and with visual design, something that had already become important in the Middle Ages, are a reminder that this is another fascinating sub-field in the critical analysis of texts. Again, the poem is essentially a narrative. It recounts how, while driving at dawn through ‘high-up stone-wall country’, the poet suddenly found himself ‘face-to-face’ with a fox. From this encounter some manner of epiphany results as the fox’s ‘wildness’ tears through the poet, leaving him yearning for ‘rebirth [...] through water’, knowing that he must somehow ‘cross back through that startled iris’. He has entered the fox’s being and his return to the human world will mean a rebirth, for his encounter with the creature ‘in the middle of the road’ has left him transformed. Of all the poems read in the class, this was, in its concluding stanza at least, perhaps the most enigmatic. Students did, however, find interesting things to say about the poem’s language, about how, for example, Heaney’s diction is suggestive of colours he does not explicitly refer to.

The choice of these poems was itself the result of a complex connection that I was later hoping to develop between the Dobyns poem and an aspect of the world not usually seen as linked to literature—the realm of technology—and this, in turn, gave rise to another sequence of connections. In this respect, *Where We Are* furnished what was to become the overarching theme of the entire course. Dobyns’s poem asks us to think critically in the sense that it asks us to understand our place in the world. This must surely be one of the most essential tasks of critical thought, to seek to understand how the individual self is related to its physical and social environment, how we are distinct and separate from that context and to what degree we are dependent upon it.

Another reason why I chose to begin with the Dobyns poem was that I thought I had also come across an interesting answer to the implicit question it poses. In 2015, the moral philosopher Derek Parfit gave a talk at the Oxford Union on the subject of effective altruism,

a movement with which he was closely involved. Although he claims to be underprepared, the arguments he presents are, characteristically, a model of elegance and coherence. After discussing the reasons for donating a percentage of one's income to charitable organizations dedicated to the alleviation of poverty and suffering, Parfit offers his audience an alternative cause, that of supporting initiatives that might guard against the extinction of humanity as a whole. The kind of 'existential risk' he has in mind here is exemplified by the possibility of a 'really large asteroid' colliding with the Earth. If human history is not to be abruptly curtailed by such an event, it will be necessary to colonize space, first establishing outposts in our own solar system before venturing further afield. Once this is accomplished, the situation will, Parfit remarks, be 'less critical'. This in itself is an interesting statement for a philosopher to make. But the chief reason that I have shared this segment of Parfit's talk with my students has to do with the remarkable way in which he contextualizes his reflection on the end of human history:

I think that we are living now in the most critical part of human history. The twentieth century, I think, was the best and the worst of all centuries so far. But it now seems fairly likely that there are no intelligent beings anywhere else in the observable universe. Now, if that's true, we may be living in the most critical part of the history of the universe. [...] I said in my first book that if you compare three outcomes: peace; a nuclear war that kills 99% of the world's population; and a nuclear war that kills 100%, I think there's a much bigger difference between the second and the third than the second and the first. And that's because I do care greatly about ending humanity. Now, that's not because I believe that human history up until now has had great value. [...] So many people up until now have had such wretched lives, that it's not clear that it would have been much worse if they'd never existed. However, we have no reason to think that our successors couldn't make things go vastly better. [...] And therefore, why this may be the critical period in the history of the universe is that, if we are the only rational, intelligent beings, it's only we who might provide the origin of what would then become a galaxy-wide civilization, which lasted for billions of years and in which life was much better than it is for most human beings.

It is a dense and in many ways challenging text, which I approached by asking my students to identify statements with which it might be possible to disagree. The topic of the colonization of space was anticipated in the Critical Reading course by a connection I had pointed out between

Space X's mission to make humanity multiplanetary and the Culture novels of the Scottish science fiction writer Iain M. Banks. The autonomous spaceport drone ships on which the company lands its first-stage rockets—the *Just Read the Instructions* and the *Of Course I Still Love You*—bear the names of spaceships referred to in Banks's novel *The Player of Games*.¹² A subsequent connection suggested the choice of the poem 'Death by Water'. Two of

Banks's Culture novels (*Consider Phlebas* and *Look to Windward*) take their titles from the final stanza of the sequence in *The Wasteland*.

Gentile or Jew

O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,
Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.

From here, yet another sequence of connections might have emerged, one which was not pursued in the class but which I will pause to consider here simply because of the way in which it illustrates how the search for intertextual connections and analogues in the study of literature can promote critical thought. The Culture novels are unashamedly utopian. They depict a civilization in which technology has eliminated all suffering. And this might remind us that *The Tempest* contains a famous critique of utopian thinking. As the King of Naples's party traipses wearily across the island on which they believe themselves to have been shipwrecked, the King's trusty councillor Gonzalo improvises a treatise on what an ideal human society might look like.

Gonzalo:

I' th' commonwealth I would by contraries
Execute all things: for no kind of traffic
Would I admit: no name of magistrate:
Letters should not be known: riches, poverty,
And use of service, none: contract, succession,
Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none:
No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil:
No occupation, all men idle, all:
And women too, but innocent and pure:
No sovereignty.

Sebastian:

Yet he would be king on't.

Antonio:

The latter end of his commonwealth forgets the beginning.

Gonzalo:

All things in common nature should produce
Without sweat or endeavour: treason, felony,
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,
Would I not have: but nature should bring forth,
Of it own kind, all foison, all abundance,
To feed my innocent people.

(*The Tempest*, Act 2 Scene 1)

The juxtaposition of the two texts across four centuries, the Culture novels against Gonzalo's well-known speech, generates an interesting critique of Banks' vision simply because there is a remarkable overlap between the civilization depicted in the former and Gonzalo's 'commonwealth'. It has long been argued, especially since the post-colonial became a central category of critical inquiry in literary studies, that Shakespeare asks us to think in *The Tempest* about the rights of colonized, indigenous peoples. Such questions, as far as we know, will not arise during the anticipated 'colonization' of Mars. But issues relating to sovereignty and its necessity almost certainly will. Gonzalo's speech, for all its naivety, suggests an important truth here, too, insofar as the defining feature of his island utopia is a superabundance of resources. This is also the chief condition for the existence of Banks's anarchic utopia. A civilization that has harnessed technology to banish the problems posed by finite resources can in theory dispense with the entire culture of political power. Once material and energetic resources are genuinely unlimited, competition of any kind beyond that entailed in the realm of games no longer has a motive, and so the struggle for power becomes meaningless, as might the entire discipline of economics. While these truths might readily be arrived at without needing to read either *The Tempest* or The Culture novels, a work of drama or fiction that addresses a concept like that of the utopian society provides us with engaging and memorable materials with which to approach this complex philosophical and political theme.

The connection between Space X's mission and the novels of Iain M. Banks is profoundly idiosyncratic. Nonetheless, it still offers a vital illustration of how a work of literature might intersect with the worlds of technology and the economy. And as such it becomes embedded in the debate I mentioned earlier about the future of the humanities. To what extent, one cannot help wondering, is Elon Musk, one of the most visionary figures in the sphere of technological innovation, inspired by literature? University arts departments in many countries have found themselves severely disadvantaged in a zero-sum game in which funding is allocated to disciplines that have found it far easier to demonstrate the economic value of their research output. The humanities find themselves at the wrong end of a spectrum, and if we wanted an example of the kind of intellectual endeavour that stood on the opposite shore, we might do worse than point to aerospace engineering and the kind of technological innovation that is driving entrepreneurial phenomena like SpaceX, the company currently at the forefront of the newly commercialized space industry. Globally, the combined activities of public and private players in this burgeoning industry is such that on average there is now a launch to orbit somewhere in the world every other day. No doubt Elon Musk would still be pursuing his vision of humanity as a multiplanetary species even had he never read any works of science fiction. But this doesn't mean we should discount the role that the Culture novels have had on his thinking about the future. I am also put in mind here of Martha Nussbaum's assertion regarding the arts: 'we need to emphasize their economic value. Business leaders

love the humanities because they know that to innovate you need more than rote knowledge. You need a trained imagination'.¹³

4. 'And since the whole thing's imagined anyhow'

The final juxtaposition of poems involved the pairing of works by two poets the class had already seen: 'Spiritual Chickens' by Stephen Dobyns and 'St Kevin and the Blackbird' by Seamus Heaney. Both of these poems, as their titles indicate, are concerned with birds. More importantly, and to a greater degree even than the poems the class had already read, both poems also told a story, which it was hoped would make them more accessible. There were also several thematic points of contact, some apparent and some less so.

Of all the poems studied in the class, 'Spiritual Chickens', with its predominantly comic tone, was probably the text students most enjoyed, in part also because, despite its length, it proved to be relatively easy to read. The story it recounts concerns a man who 'eats a chicken every day for lunch'. Once consumed, these chickens remain in the man's dining room as ghosts, invisible to him until, one day, the space they occupy becomes so overcrowded that one of the chickens 'is popped back across the spiritual plain to the earthly'. The rest of the poem deals with the way in which the hapless eater of chickens copes with this paranormal event.

The class was asked to consider how the poem's very simple first line—'A man eats a chicken every day for lunch'—might be read as steering the reader towards a judgement of the protagonist, which it clearly does as it implies, if nothing else, a severe lack of imagination. As in *Where We Are*, this poem, too, contains an exposition of its own central metaphor. In other words, the poem itself tells us how it should be read and the class was invited to identify the lines where this auto-commentary appears.

In essence, the poem is an exploration of how the human mind copes when suddenly reality no longer corresponds to one's personal view of the world. The 'man' is 'faced with the choice between something odd / in the world or something broken in his head'. He opts for the latter, preferring to believe, from the safety of the psychiatric ward, that his imagination is out of control rather than concede that his opinion on the existence of ghost chickens might have been mistaken. The role assigned to the imagination here ('Much better to think he had / imagined it, that he had made it happen') would generate an interesting connection with the other poem in the pair.

Heaney, too, is concerned with a bird whose fate becomes bound up with the moral choices made by a particular individual. In this instance, though, the human protagonist, St Kevin, has a name. While his arms are stretched out in an attitude of prayer, a blackbird alights on the upturned palm of the hand that, for want of space in the saint's cell, has wound up 'out the window'. The bird promptly 'settles down to nest' in Kevin's immobile hand and so he waits patiently for weeks until the chicks 'are hatched and fledged and flown'. Here, if

we wanted to tease out the contrasts with the other Dobyns poem, the blackbird is a symbol not of the fleeting and transitory but of continuities in the natural cycle of generation and, more strikingly, of the need for rootedness—literally in the bird’s dependence on the tree anchored in place by its roots. For this is what the saint becomes, a kind of tree. It is a transformation that is at once almost unimaginable and also entirely natural as the tree of Christ’s wooden cross, which in his body’s *imitatio Christi* he had already conjured in his mind (Kevin’s palm is ‘stiff / As a crossbeam’), becomes simply the tree from which it was made. If Dobyns’s poem, on some level, is about a failure to connect, a failure of compassion, then Heaney’s retelling of the St Kevin tale is the opposite. It is about what a human being looks like when utterly consumed by the compassionate impulse. Although the legend is the stuff of medieval Christian hagiography and so, one might think, composed of cultural and religious themes deeply unfamiliar to an East Asian reader, there are probably excellent grounds for exploring how closely it might be seen to echo strands of ethical thought in both Buddhism and animist traditions.

The poem is also about the value of telling stories and about the way in which they enable us to see the world from another’s perspective. Given that this is all made up anyway, why not imagine how Kevin feels, the poet urges—‘imagine being Kevin’? Is he ‘self-forgetful or in agony all the time?’ As in the Dobyns poem, we are invited to consider how much of what we think of as reality is ‘in the mind’? And if this is where reality lies, can we access how the world is perceived and experienced by the minds of others? Here, too, we find ourselves in the presence of an argument that is often used to justify the study of literature. A notable example is to be found in John Carey’s *What Good Are the Arts*, where he writes of ‘literature’s ability to activate intelligence and feeling towards a practical end’.¹⁴ On the question of the imagination and empathy, Martha Nussbaum has spoken of how the humanities, besides teaching ‘critical thinking’, can also make it possible to ‘imagine life from the point of view of someone unlike yourself’.¹⁵

Heaney’s appeal to the imagination is couched in measured, neutral tones that are deceptively matter of fact. On the one hand, this is the voice of the mature poet observing that, of course, we all know that poems like this are all about getting us to imagine some experience or other, just as even the most devout Christian must suspect that the tales of the medieval hagiographer are fabrications. It is a tone of voice established by the opening line—‘And then there was St Kevin and the blackbird’—with its implication that this is just one more tale among many told about the saints of old. Yet behind this good-natured and magnanimous admission that there is a mode of saintliness that is all just part of the furniture in rural Ireland, there lies a more sophisticated idea about literature that we also find in Carey’s analysis, the notion that literature is uniquely the cultural form most able to *think critically about itself*.¹⁶ Heaney’s poem, in other words, reflects on what poems do. What does it mean to be made aware of imagining an experience that one knows to have been

imaginary to begin with? These are notions that can be traced back to Theseus's well-known speech towards the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act V)

My students enjoyed 'Spiritual Chickens' and had some valuable insights to offer. It was suggested, quite plausibly, that the poem poses a question about how to live, about whether it is better to be unthinking but happy or thinking and unhappy. The poem, it was proposed, sees human beings as condemned to suffer by their ability to think, a fate not shared by the unthinking chicken. The man in the poem may lack imagination but he is not 'chicken-brained'. Some students read the poem as an allegory about attitudes to the environment, noting the implied condemnation of the carnivorous lifestyle. Few students chose to write about the St Kevin poem. Those that did explored the theme of the connection between human beings and nature, which was linked in one instance to Buddhist teaching. The poem was also interpreted, rightly I think, as being about 'unconditional kindness' and about the absence of boundaries between self and others to the degree that other people's happiness becomes our own.

5. Conclusion

The forging of connections can be difficult, which is perhaps the point about the use E. M. Forster famously made of the verb 'connect' in *Howard's End*. One discovery that helped greatly to enliven my attempt to teach 'St Kevin and the Blackbird' was that Seamus Heaney himself seemed to be all over the internet giving readings of the poem. The most enlightening of these performances was a video of a talk the poet gave at the offices of his publisher Faber and Faber.¹⁷ Before he reads, Heaney explains that the poem is about 'doing the right thing for the reward of doing the right thing'. This ethos is expressed quite explicitly in the poem where we are told that St Kevin is praying 'to labour and not to seek reward'. Literary publishing, Heaney tells his audience, like the service Kevin provides for the nesting blackbird, is a 'labour of love', in which one perseveres not for reasons of monetary gain but simply because publishing works of literature is in itself the 'right thing' to do. Doubtless he would have said the same about the intellectual work of reading poetry. And perhaps it is all too easy here to feel saintly, and sound sanctimonious, about doing the Lord's work by

bringing poetry into classrooms where it usually has no place. But in a world where everyone is connected and no one is, it does seem that poetry offers a way to practice certain habits of thinking and feeling that are in danger of being lost.

¹ See *The Cambridge Life Competencies Framework: Critical Thinking*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020: 3.

² See, for example, Dwight Atkinson, “A Critical Approach to Critical Thinking in TESOL,” *TESOL Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (1997): 71–94, who examines the notion that critical thinking is a social practice the value of which is not so readily grasped in non-Western cultures. See especially pp. 80–83 for a discussion of critical thinking in the context of the Japanese ‘sociocultural system’. Maura Sellars et al., “Conversations on Critical Thinking: Can Critical Thinking Find Its Way Forward as the Skill Set and Mindset of the Century?,” *Education Sciences* 8, no. 4 (2018): 205, note that ‘the emphasis on the “rational” and the “objective” in the definitions of critical thinking today can indeed be traced to Western rationalist tendencies’, though they also explore how, for example, traditions of thinking in the Muslim societies of South Asia can be shown to share some of the rationalist assumptions that derive from Socratic teaching. One of the key issues they highlight is the potential for critical thinking to be viewed as encouraging challenges to ‘the authority of singular perspectives, knowledge and power’. It is, of course, not hard to see how such notions might generate anxiety in certain cultural contexts. That Western cultures embrace critical thinking precisely because it offers to challenge authority and established hierarchies can be seen to some degree in an interview given by Martha Nussbaum following the publication of her book *Not for Profit*. She argues that ‘liberal education [...] refines the ability to think critically and examine the arguments of politicians, which keeps them accountable, and promotes a civil and reasonable style of debate’. See Martha C. Nussbaum, “Our World Needs the Humanities.” Interview by Jennifer Oriol, *The Australian*, July 13, 2011.

³ See Martin Davies, “What is Critical Thinking? And do Universities Really Teach It?” *The Conversation*, November 23, 2016. An excellent discussion of rationales and methodologies for the teaching of critical thinking in English language classes can be found in Paul Dummett and John Hughes, *Critical Thinking in ELT: A Working Model for the Classroom* (Boston, MA: National Geographic Learning, 2019).

⁴ The quotation is from Eliot’s essay on Dante and be found in T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, edited with an introduction by Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 206.

⁵ On metaphor in poetry, see Jay Parini, *Why Poetry Matters* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 66–77. Parini cites Robert Frost’s *Education by Poetry*, where he insists that, “‘unless you are at home in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at ease with figurative values: you don’t know the metaphor in its strength and its weakness. [...] You are not safe in science; you are not safe in history’”.

⁶ Cited by Neil Astley in his ‘Introduction’ to *Staying Alive: Real Poems for Unreal Times*, edited by Neil Astley (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2002), 30.

⁷ The *Cambridge Life Competencies Framework* booklet gives ‘looking for similarities and differences’ (p. 4) as an example of an activity at the foundational level demonstrating the ability to recognize ‘patterns and relationships’.

⁸ See Julian Bell, “Kestrel, Burgher, Spout,” *London Review of Books* 42, no. 8 (16 April 2020): 22–24, on the recent Van Eyck exhibition at the Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Ghent (‘Van Eyck: An Optical Revolution’): ‘Fra Angelicos look truly strange when set next to Van Eycks’ (p. 24).

⁹ The plays are cited throughout from William Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, ed. by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2007).

¹⁰ *Oxford Dictionary of English*, ed. by Angus Stevenson, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹¹ For a much earlier instance of this geometrical notion employed psychologically by a poet, see Fiammetta Papi, “Tetragono (Par. XVII 24).” In *Dante, l’italiano*, edited by Giovanna Frosini and Giuseppe Polimeni (Florence: Accademia della Crusca-GoWare, 2021), 129–130.

¹² See Iain M. Banks, *The Player of Games* (London: Orbit, 1989), p. 68. In fact, there have been two different barges with the name *Just Read the Instructions*. A fourth dronship has been named *A Shortfall of Gravitax*, which is an abbreviation of *Experiencing a Significant Gravitax Shortfall*, a spaceship in the Culture novel *Look to Windward*, an extended corollary to *Consider Phlebas*, in which Banks revisits the war recounted in the earlier book to offer a more wistful and ultimately more optimistic meditation on the responsibilities that accompany overwhelming technological superiority. From the start, SpaceX have always painted the names of the dronships on their decks, making them clearly visible on aerial photographs, suggesting that it matters to the company that we know they have been reading The Culture books. These are, to be sure, in-jokes, and few

other SF authors can match Banks's wit and sense of irony. Yet the ideological underpinnings are not, for all that, remotely lightweight.

¹³ Transcribed from Nussbaum's interview with the National Endowment for the Humanities, a summary of the central arguments contained in her book *Not for Profit*, by Cheryl Jacob, 'Martha Nussbaum on why democracy needs the humanities', *Humanities Across Borders* (5 October 2017).

¹⁴ John Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 258.

¹⁵ See again the transcription by Jacob (2017), and also Martha Nussbaum, "Cultivating the Imagination", *New York Times* (October 17, 2010): 'Finally, we need the imaginative ability to put ourselves in the positions of people different from ourselves, whether by class or race or religion or gender. Democratic politics involves making decisions that affect other people and groups. We can only do this well if we try to imagine what their lives are like and how changes of various sorts affect them. The imagination is an innate gift, but it needs refinement and cultivation; this is what the humanities provide'. The belief that studying the humanities is of value because it leads to a more imaginative engagement with other people's experience of reality is echoed in Rosário Couta Costa, "The Place of the Humanities in Today's Knowledge Society", *Palgrave Communications*, 5 no. 38 (2019): 'Critical thought, acknowledgement of others, the ability to adjust to different realities and so forth are indispensable traits in any situation—in any institution, organization, government or company. It would thus follow that the humanities should be explicitly and directly promoted by public policy as is specialized knowledge that directly serves firms and markets'. The kind of 'specialized knowledge' that Costa has in mind here is business administration. At the same time, it seems crucial to bear in mind the wariness evinced by Stefan Collini, *Speaking of Universities* (London and New York: Verso, 2017) with respect to customary invocations of 'empathy' and 'imagination' in recent justifications of the humanities: 'Quite a lot of the well-meaning statements that are issued about the humanities tend to reduce to a series of abstract nouns, in which "imagination", "empathy" and the other usual suspects invariably figure' (224). Collini counsels against the tendency to make 'exaggerated claims for the moral benefits' of the arts subjects, suggesting instead that it would be better 'to start from some of the facts of our actual practice in our particular, diverse disciplines' (226). A more secure basis for justifying the study of the humanities, he believes, lies in the opportunities they afford for developing a deeper and 'more systematic understanding' of 'human activities across times and cultures' (227).

¹⁶ See Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?* 174: 'The first claim I would make for literature is that, unlike the other arts, it can criticize itself'.

¹⁷ The talk was given in 2009 on the occasion of both Heaney's seventieth birthday and the eightieth anniversary of Faber and Faber, which was also, of course, the publishing house at which T. S. Eliot worked as an editor.

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