The Poetics of Doing and the Doing of Poetry: Practice and Ritual in the Teaching of Poetry

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Abstract

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Poetry often exists as a neglected form within high school English Language Arts classrooms. Whether taught with trepidation or avoided with anxiety, few teachers feel adequately equipped to teach the reading and writing of poetry. This may feel obvious in an era fixed on quantification of one variety or another. How could poetry—that, allegedly, most luxurious of linguistic forms—flourish in the STEM-nutrient-rich soil of contemporary educational priorities? By first charting the historical precedent for today's poetry pedagogy, then considering why teachers bother to incorporate the form, and, finally, framing the classroom as a site for communal practice and formation, this dissertation works to build a robust sense of poetry's educational possibilities for student and teacher alike. Relying on qualitative interview conversations with three public high school English Language Arts teachers who lead poetry-rich classrooms, I draw from the fields of English education, practice theory, educational philosophy, and ritual studies to offer a rehabilitated, prismatic conception of the teaching of poetry. Further, this dissertation argues for a definition of poetry teaching as a particular practice that embodies a character of community, quality of inhabitance, and concern with meaning in ways essential for our contemporary educational moment.

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Dedication

For my teachers.

Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front
Wendell Berry

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.
So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.
Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.
Call that profit. Prophesy such returns.
Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.
Listen to carrion — put your ear
close, and hear the faint chattering
of the songs that are to come.
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.
So long as women do not go cheap
for power, please women more than men.
Ask yourself: Will this satisfy
a woman satisfied to bear a child?
Will this disturb the sleep
of a woman near to giving birth?
Go with your love to the fields.
Lie easy in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap. Swear allegiance
to what is nighest your thoughts.
As soon as the generals and the politicos
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.

Wendell Berry, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" from New Collected Poems. Copyright © 2012 by Wendell Berry. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, LLC on behalf of Counterpoint Press, counterpointpress.com.

Introduction

When I remember coming to know poetry, I remember a ratty red swivel chair and an overhead projector light, slicing through the dark. I remember my teacher. I remember wanting to make a poster where I rhymed A. E. Stallings' last name with the word "ballin'." I remember "Poet of the Class" T-shirts, featuring a crude rendering of that year's winning poet's likeness made by a classmate. I remember March Madness-style poetry brackets. I remember the end of Tony Hoagland's "Personal:" "Oh life! Can you blame me / for making a scene?" I remember watching a three-year-old boy recite Billy Collins' (2003a) "Litany" on YouTube with my classmates—I remember the way he chirped, "you are the bread and the knife" (D Chelpka, 2010). I remember the chaos of the hallway passing period dissolving in the presence of a daily poem to start class. So much of my initiation into the worlds I now inhabit with deep comfort and joy—the worlds of poetry and of teaching—came via myths, materialities, and ritual practices present in a windowless room at the end of the hallway in my high school's oldest wing, across from the library.

As I became a teacher, I regularly drew on my memories of this poetry-rich classroom. How did my teacher make poetry cool and the English classroom a place where teenagers looked forward—openly!—to reading some carefully chosen *Poetry* magazine excerpt from an overhead transparency? Was it the poetry? The dailiness? The teacher's enthusiasm? The sense of camaraderie? Having a niche? I experimented, as teachers do, with various means for cultivating a similar environment for my own students, the kind of environment that nurtured my budding love for literature and nudged me toward the teaching profession.

With my own schedule of classes, I started with what I trusted "worked" and took up the fond, daily poetry practice. I waited for my students, class period after class period, to find their

way into my room—sometimes crashing in vivaciously, sometimes trickling in quietly, but nonetheless entering the space I had inhabited since before seven that morning. I would wait for them to find themselves ready to begin, often indicated by a fading conversational volume and the stillness of desks since moved and backpacks since opened. Greeting them, I would tell them the name of the poet and the title of that day's poem, click the hyperlink on my daily slide, and zoom in on the words. I would walk over to the door, close it, and switch off the lights. Though not by way of an overhead projector in the style of my high school days, the projected poem illuminated the front of the room. Then, we would read. One day, Eve L. Ewing's (2015) "to the notebook kid"—reading, I would relish in the repetition of the word "kid," reminding me that these students were, in fact, kids who might harbor in them "helium bout to spring." Another day, Brenda Shaughnessy's "I Have a Time Machine" (2016), I looked forward to the final couplet that always won an extra echo in the room, "Strange not to be able to pick up the pace as I'd like; / the past is so horribly fast." Yet another day, I replaced the plan with Campbell McGrath's "Pentantina for Five Vowels" (2012), hearing it on a podcast during my morning commute to work. The line, "Nothing gets done except by the doing" garnering unexpected questions from the crowd, "Are you trying to motivate us or something, Miss?" I would read the poem and we would take a beat, sometimes reacting, responding, or reading it again. Some years the students "ranked" the poems on a ledger. Most days, we let the poem linger a minute and then moved on.

The simple pedagogical decision to carry on my former teacher's poetry habits had me subscribing to *Poetry* magazine, listening to daily episodes of Tracy K. Smith's *The Slowdown* podcast as my morning coffee brewed, checking my email for the Academy of American Poets poem-a-day, and ordering starter anthologies like Billy Collins' *Poetry 180* and Garrison

Keillor's *Good Poems*. My hunt for the kind of poems I wanted to share with my students quickly took on a life beyond my planning period, beyond pedagogical pragmatism. I immersed myself and became a "poetry person" (which really just meant I tracked the US Poet Laureate appointments with the kind of anticipation someone else might attach to the NFL draft).

In a former study (Davis, 2023), I considered the daily poetry ritual of my former classroom, a ritual I took up in line with my former teacher and Billy Collins' *Poetry 180* (2003b) poet laureate project. While this ritual serves as an early, formative site in the arc of my life as an English teacher, I wondered what—if any—meaning it held for my students. More specifically, I was curious about student perceptions of the daily poetry practice and if they understood it differently than traditional, analytical, "schoolish" ways of engaging with the form. I reached out to several classes of former students, tracked down four, and interviewed them. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the daily poetry practice provided my former students with their first regular poetry exposure. As such, their individual prior misconceptions about poetry—that it is too vulnerable, too academic, too rigid, too juvenile—fell away in the face of multiplicity and some of them attested to a newfound impetus to weave poetry into the fabric of their outside-of-school lives. The participants spoke not just of their personal experiences, but of a sense of classroom community that reflected an increased sense of openness, collaboration, thoughtfulness, and, generally, a positive deviation from what they experienced as the norm for schooling. One participant, John, remarked on how the daily poem gave him a moment in the school day where the stress and striving fell away briefly, "It's almost like you go home for a little bit" (Davis, 2023, p. 373). Since conducting this study, I have begun to think about ritual and its power to build communities, to provoke deeper engagement with the content of literature, and to offer the feeling of "home" in an otherwise un-homey environment of fluorescently-lit

sterility, bureaucratic testing pressure, and rigid bell schedules. I have also worked to broaden how I understand ritual in the classroom as something that does not exist in isolation from the rest of a teacher's practice but flows from it. Further, I have come back to my initial question regarding my position toward this daily poetry practice from the vantage point of the teacher. The daily poem ritual might have been more meaningful for me, not me as a high school student but me as a teacher—leading the ritual, five periods a day, every day of the school year, every year. It might have been the most meaningful distillation of what I was trying to nurture in my larger classroom practice.

Reflecting now on the experience of the teacher, and the ways in which my extracurricular interest in poetry infused my high school classroom with a certain kind of newness (and vice versa), I note the reciprocity of this relationship—between content and life, couch and classroom—and the throughline that is the teacher. My experience in the classroom moved me toward a type of curiosity beyond its walls, which subsequently became a part of my person, and that curiosity then boomeranged back into the classroom space with verve and enthusiasm. This generative self-cultivation around poetry, personal experience, and pedagogy helps contextualize what I want to consider as the matter that makes up a teaching practice. Further, while educational research must include and center the students with whom the teacher shares her classroom, the present inquiry gives specific attention to the teacher. By understanding a teacher's performance of and participation in classroom practices as a reflexive activity—one which shapes the teacher into the kind of teacher they are—my current inquiry will be in a position to examine how teachers are formed by their teaching practices. It is with these histories and musings in mind that I consider the possibilities for ritual as a dimension of practice in the English Language Arts classroom, the special affordances of poetry as the content for the

English teaching practice, the ways in which practices bedrock the potential for classroom community, and the formation of the teacher through her practice.

In pursuing this inquiry, I have two other concerns in mind: first, the obvious assertion that poetry often exists as a neglected form within high school English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms. Whether taught with trepidation or avoided with anxiety, few teachers feel adequately equipped to teach the reading and writing of poetry. Throughout my teaching experience, I questioned why poetry was seldom taught, or so seldom taught well, and why everyone I seemed to ask for advice on teaching it in my early years did not quite know how to make poetry sing for students, nor quite how to make it sing for themselves. I wondered if the "problem" of poetry pedagogy might be tethered to a scarcity of positive poetry experiences in teachers' former schooling and/or personal lives, experiences that preceded those of their teaching. Rather than continue to despair over poetry's persistent precarity in the curriculum, I pivot instead to dialoguing with teachers who lead poetry-rich classrooms. What insight might arise through exploring ELA teaching practices that incorporate poetry in multidimensional, nontraditional ways? Further, what insight might arise through exploring ELA teaching practices that include poetry in ritualistic, habitual, and quotidian ways? There seems to be wisdom available from teachers who build poetry into their teaching practice or build their teaching practice around poetry.

Second, this inquiry exists in large part due to a contemporary educational milieu that shows a penchant for increasing mechanization, individualization, competition, and a host of other neoliberal ills. That poetry is found missing (or sparse) from classrooms may feel obvious in an era fixated on quantification of one variety or another. How could poetry—that, allegedly, most luxurious of linguistic forms—flourish in the STEM-nutrient-rich soil of contemporary

educational priorities? Does such a rigid, performance-driven system have room for engagements with literature that look nothing like The Writing and Language Test on the SAT, but instead embody a character of community and ritual? Amidst the bureaucratic pressure of education, what would it mean for the teacher to develop classroom practices that allow her and her students to "go home for a little bit?" I return to the epigraph, Wendell Berry's "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,"

> Your mind will be punched in a card
> and shut away in a little drawer.
> When they want you to buy something
> they will call you. When they want you
> to die for profit they will let you know.
> So, friends, every day do something
> that won't compute. (2012)

Can poetry offer resources to fray the edges of a world of card-punched learning objectives? How does participation in practices that might not compute hold out opportunities for a richer experience of meaning in the school? And in what ways is the teacher herself shaped through the enactment of these practices?

Introducing Those Joining this Journey

As these pages think about poetry and the ways in which we teach it, I include three teacher voices besides my own—Esther, Frank, and Maeve. All three teach high school English Language Arts and do so with poetry close at hand. Each of the three teachers shared an interest in incorporating a ritualized poetry practice into their classrooms and engaging in dialogue about teaching poetry more generally. My connections with them vary. Two are former colleagues—

one in New York City and one in the suburbs of Chicago—and the other is a former Master of Arts in Teaching pre-service student of mine, now teaching in New York City. All three teachers teach, as I did, at public high schools in the United States. Esther is in her sixth year of teaching. Frank is in his fourth. Maeve is in her eighth. Their voices will braid with my own, particularly in Chapters 2, 4, and 5, in consideration of both practical and theoretical aspects of poetry instruction.

Esther is an Asian-American female who desires to infuse the learning of her classroom with joy and fun without sacrificing high academic standards. Her pedagogy is experimental, and she enjoys trying out new ways of helping students access and grapple with content. She works to strike a balance in her teaching practice, describing how "learning can be challenging, but one teaching mindset I like to try and remind myself of is that learning is an experience and one that, with great care and consideration of the learners, can be more than just accessible—it can be exciting and something to look forward to." Esther's classroom radiates this balance of collegiality and play. Working at an art school, she has adorned her walls with student creative works and color-coded the book shelf. Music plays in the transitions. Succulents sit atop a bightly lit window sill. On a given day, students might be huddled around Jenga blocks, engaging in a playfully structured socratic seminar, or they might be commenting on each other's annotations in Google docs, building a dialogic thread. She mirrors this range of learning experiences with her poetry instruction too, experimenting with different angles through which she and her students might contemplate the poet's feelings or otherwise connect with the text. "Poetry's what we do everyday," she responds to a group of students who wonder about the slant rhyme in a Miley Cyrus song.

Maeve is a 30-year-old, straight, white female who teaches in a large, suburban public high school in the suburbs of Chicago. She says she "likes to take class, but not myself, seriously." She believes hard work and having fun need not be mutually exclusive in the classroom and enjoys "modeling for my students that life bears no sweeter fruit than working hard at something you feel is meaningful." Her educational philosophy is "anchored in the belief that all students should view their school, and my class, as a place they not only attend but *belong*." Heavily involved in extracurricular activities—coaching swimming and softball, advising the journalism club and the school newspaper—Maeve exudes personal investment in the doings of her classroom. She laughs readily with her students and they with her. Twinkle lights sparkle, bookshelves line the perimeter, and vibrant posters cover the walls—one reads, "Work hard and be nice to people"—the joviality is palpable, even as the students grow quiet in the presence of the daily poem.

Frank is a Korean American, non-disabled, cisgender straight male, in his first year of teaching in New York City's Department of Education (or, the "DOE"). He first taught in South America for two years, in Chile and Ecuador, and then taught one year on a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant grant in South Korea. His students described him to me as "chill" and "always calm," words which he echoes in a description of himself: "My personality and teaching style may be calm and lighthearted, but I still expect the best from students—to a reasonable degree." Frank and his students share a classroom with the math department, the walls decorated in part by geometrical proofs and in part by colorful literary device posters. Markers, posters, scissors, rulers, and six printed out poems by Mvskoke Nation poet and 23rd U.S. Poet Laureate, Joy Harjo, splay across the desks. "Safe space" stickers affix to the cabinet. A large cellphone storage pocket chart hangs to the right of the classroom door; students deposit their devices on

the way in without much chagrin. As the students trickle in after lunch, Frank greets them in English and Spanish interchangeably before prompting the room to aesthetically represent the poetic choices of their respective Harjo poems on their poster boards.

For a closer look at each of their school contexts, I have included the most recently published data regarding teacher and student demographics as made available by the 2021-22 School Quality Snapshot from the New York City Department of Education and the 2022-2023 Illinois School Report card from the Illinois State Board of Education in Appendix A. Both Esther and Frank, in New York City public schools, are in a representational minority teaching demographic in relation to their school staff population, 12% and 21% Asian, respectively. Maeve is in the majority demographic for teachers at her school, 86% White. Yet, this majority in the teaching force is juxtaposed with a student population that is 33% White-identified. For all three schools, the largest represented student demographic is Hispanic or Latinx. Though this demographic data is but one way of articulating the distinctiveness of each school, a classroom's demographics come to bear on the place and space of the learning, the kinds of practices by which a teacher engages her students, and ways in which classroom community is created and sustained.

All three teachers work in school contexts that do not require the inclusion of poetry—in this way, their school contexts are the norm, for poetry is all but neglected in state and national standards. New York State Next Generation English Language Arts Learning Standards mention poetry or poems once as part a series of potential options for the teacher to consider for student writing: "11-12W4[1]: Create a poem, story, play, artwork, or other response to a text, author, theme or personal experience; demonstrate knowledge and understanding of a variety of

[1] 11-12W4, the writing standard for 11th and 12th grade corresponds to 9-10W4, the same writing standard for 9th and 10th.

techniques and genres. Explain connections between the original and the created work" (New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2017). The operative word "or" indicates a kind of indifference—poetry can be the creative medium a student chooses to work with, yes, but they might equally prefer to craft a story, play, artwork, or other response. The Illinois State Learning Standards for English Language Arts do list poetry with more regularity, including it in the "range of text types for 6-12" (Illinois State Board of Education [ISBE], 2010, p. 57), yet *always* among a list of other literary genres. For example, RL7: "Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text" (p. 38) and this explanatory note on range and content of student reading, "Through extensive reading of stories, dramas, poems, and myths from diverse cultures and different time periods, students gain literary and cultural knowledge as well as familiarity with various text structures and elements" (p. 10). While the New York standards list poetry exclusively under the writing subheading, the Illinois standards list poetry exclusively under reading. Across the standards, poetry seems an afterthought and an option among many. As schools algin their curricula with such standards, it is unsurprising that poetry so seldom makes the cut or, in some cases, squeaks through in the form of a number of tokenized and tired poems—think Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" (1915), Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" (1845) or O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi" (1906), all of which are listed in the ISBE's potential literary text list (ISBE, 2010, p. 58).

Regarding the selection of the three teachers, I chose a small number of teachers for this project in order to more closely observe and discuss practices with poetry and make for a manageable set of qualitative data. The three participants were the only three I reached out to—chosen for their ingenuity in teaching English and their openness to working with (and prior

inclusion of) poetry in their classrooms in a way that greatly surpassed what state standards require. While our conversations happened largely on Zoom, the conversations live anew in these pages—brought together to paint a fuller picture of the practice and teaching of poetry. I have also drawn from work within the fields of poetry, English education, philosophy of education, practice theory, and ritual studies, the inclusion of which aims at a fuller—practically grounded and philosophically considered—conception of all that it is to teach poetry and posit that the teaching of poetry is itself a practice.

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In **Chapter One,** I review recent and historical literature on the teaching of poetry, underscoring poetry's enduring presence throughout human history, from ancient epics to contemporary verse, and its inherent connection to the human experience. This chapter details the pervasive sentiment that teachers often report feeling fearful, insecure, or avoidant in the face of poetry, despite perceptions of its significance, and notices how this sentiment seeps into student experience. Largely in debt to Mark Dressman and Mark Faust's historical review of articles pertaining to the teaching of poetry in *English Journal*, this section outlines their work describing *populist* and *formalist* ideologies in poetry teaching. Briefly, the *formalist* approach, influenced by Russian Formalism, views poems as self-contained, revered art objects worthy of rigorous academic study. It emphasizes close reading of canonical works to uncover their linguistic and literary complexities. In contrast, the *populist* approach emerged as a counter-hegemonic movement, prioritizing student-centeredness and reader empowerment over text-centered analysis. *Populist* pedagogy encourages students to engage with poetry in playful and experiential ways, such as writing their own poems or exploring diverse forms of expression. The chapter also highlights the challenges faced by both *formalist* and *populist* approaches,

including a lack of cross-pollination between ideological camps and a scarcity of diverse resources. Finally, I then read recent *English Journal* articles on the teaching of poetry with Dressman and Faust's framework in mind, highlighting five features of current practice: poetry as invitation, aesthetic dialogue, power, performance, and connection. This chapter, while serving as context and surveying the field of poetry education, also exists to position my study slightly "slant," to borrow from Emily Dickinson[2], in my priority to observe and make central specific practices with poetry in the classroom, moving beyond the formalist-populist binary to explore the social, material, affective, and formative dimensions of teachers' work with poetry in the classroom.

Chapter Two works to sketch a space beyond poetry's formal elements or potential use value in the classroom. Because poetry demands a more comprehensive set of conceptual and interpretive tools compared to prose, we risk losing sight of the purpose of including poetry in the classroom. Such purposes include but are not limited to the ways in which working with poetry promotes student expression. I consider poetry more holistically and try to capture what oftentimes feels ineffable about the form. Drawing on conversations with Maeve, Frank, and Esther, this chapter integrates the words of teachers and poets together to consider some of the elements that draw us to poetry—both in general and in the classroom: poetry's brevity that allows for a higher yield of exposure to literature and facilitation of diverse text experience, poetry's symbolic and metaphorical logic, poetry as distilled and revitalized language, and poetry's power to cultivate attention. Through contemplating these dimensions of poetry, I posit that the specific genre of poetry offers teachers the grounds upon which they might ask questions of meaning in their classroom.

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[2] Dickinson, E. (1998) "Tell all the truth but tell it slant —." *The poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading edition.* The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1890)

Chapter Three pivots from an exclusive focus on poetry to engage the theoretical field of practice. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* and Theodore Schatzki's Wittgensteinian notion that practices determine the parameters of future experience, the chapter underscores the significance of the practice view, particularly in understanding human life as a series of interdependent practices rather than individual or collective entities. Thus, I consider how practices shape social life and identity and how individual experiences and social structures act upon each other to illustrate how personal histories and environments—both conscious and unconscious—influence teaching practice. This chapter emphasizes the dynamic, affective, material, and interconnected nature of practices; the complex interplay between individual agency and social structure; and the ways in which they continually shape social spaces like the classroom.

Taking up Alasdair MacIntyre's insight that practices have within them goods internal to their particular practice and engaging the debate over whether or not teaching ought be categorized as a practice, **Chapter Four** considers the conscious and systematic dimension of practices for their purchase in conceiving of the teaching of poetry as a discrete practice. Further exploring the intricate dimensions of practice in conversation with participant data, I advance Chris Higgins' notion that teaching is definitionally a practice. Sketching a vision for the teaching of poetry as a practice, I turn to Theodore Schatzki's four phenomena of practice: practical understanding, rules, teleo-affective structure, and general understanding. I consider such phenomena with an eye to the poetry practices of Maeve, Esther, and Frank's classrooms. What is it to grow as a poet? A reader and teacher of poetry? How—through what doings—does this happen? Finally, this chapter examines the notion of apprenticeship and the role of the institution of the school as worthwhile elements of practice—especially that of teaching poetry.

Chapter Five begins with the obstacle and provocateur of questions about ritualistic poetry practices: the inhospitable nature of our classroom environments, and by extension schools more broadly. Working to imagine and act otherwise, classroom practices—like ritual—reinvigorate the classroom space with a greater sense of spirit, embodiment, and community, thus giving legs to such imagining. In dialogue with the educational philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche and bell hooks and ritual theorists like Catherine Bell and Byung-Chul Han, I propose the teaching of poetry and the deployment of ritualized practice as a way of ameliorating the disheartening and highly mechanized present state of United States schooling. Drawing particularly on Byung-Chul Han's notion that rituals render time and space more inhabitable, this chapter philosophically considers how classroom rituals with poetry might transform the classroom into a more habitable and communal space.

I aim to fully consider the teaching of poetry, its historical precedent, its present manifestations, its internal goods as a practice, and its propensity to leverage ritual. I do so alongside Maeve, Esther, and Frank and alongside an array of English educators, poets, practice theorists, and scholars of ritual. Though there is not one driving research question, this is an inquiry into all that it might mean to foreground poetry in our classrooms. My concern for how poetry is a way of doing and being in the world, and what that means for students and teachers, lives at the center of this project. While specific in its scope, it is my hope that these pages will resonate widely with teachers, reminding us of the radical force a classroom holds and the ways a teacher can transform the mundanity of a school day while encouraging us to rest in the glow that what we do as educators is sticky work.

Chapter 1: Our Inheritance and Our Present

Poetry[3]

I too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers that there is in

it after all, a place for the genuine.

Hands that can grasp, eyes

that can dilate, hair that can rise

if it must, these things are important not because a

high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are

useful; when they become so derivative as to become unintelligible, the

same thing may be said for all of us—that we

do not admire what

we cannot understand.

—Marianne Moore (1924, p. 27)

1.1 "Poetry / I too dislike it" (Moore, 1924)

Poetry has been tethered to our humanness for centuries—read, written, and recited long before it became a subject of curricular debate. The Epic of Gilgamesh, dating back to 2100 BC; seventeenth-century Japanese haiku; and Homer's *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* of the late eighth century are but few in a vast constellation of poetry's continual iterations and redefinitions across ages. We continue to return to the form, Christian Wiman (2004) writes, because "in the end we

[3] "Poetry" by Marianne Moore is in the public domain.

go to poetry for one reason, so that we might more fully inhabit our lives and the world in which we live them, and that if we more fully inhabit these things, we might be less apt to destroy both." Put another way, The Academy of American Poets (1993) declares the truth that "We each carry lines of poetry with us" and that "we clutch these 'life lines' like totems." Poetry, clutched and carried with us, speaks a lasting language from which we cannot seem to part. Yet, despite its historical roots and richness as a literary tradition, poetry's role in the English classroom tells a fraught story of endurance marked by inconsistent fluctuations. Perhaps this makes sense. English Language Arts, typically the force now in charge of proffering poetry to the masses, did not take its place as a formal classroom subject in the United States until the nineteenth century, in the 1880s (Applebee, 1974).

Despite the varying degrees of space it has held in English classrooms over the last roughly 140 years, poetry is a feared component of the curriculum for many teachers and is resisted by many students (Sigvardsson, 2020; Farber, 2015). In short, to parrot Moore (1924), we too dislike it. Though twenty years old, Peter Benton's (1999) extensive examination of poetry teaching in secondary schools is the latest of its kind, revealing that while a majority of teachers rank poetry reading and discussion as "very important" (p. 524), a substantial number of teachers simultaneously expressed "a sense of inadequacy about their own knowledge and teaching skill where poetry was concerned" (p. 521). Across two surveys, teachers cited reasons for poetry's inclusion in the curriculum, including its capacity to heighten awareness of and appreciation for "the possibilities of language" (p. 524), distinguished economy of form, and role in fostering critical and analytical thinking. A few teachers noted poetry's emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions, valuing how it inspires affective response, perspective-taking, and increased sensitivity to themselves and others (p. 525).

The disconnect between heralding poetry's importance and feelings of inadequacy in poetry instruction is the first of two disjunctions to note in the research. Faust and Dressman's extensive study of 530 articles published from 1912 to 2005 on the teaching of poetry in the foremost journal of literacy education in the United States, *English Journal* (EJ), found that even though the *populist* reader-response approach to poetry prevailed in the pages of *EJ* after 1970, this seemed to "represent a pyrrhic victory for that orientation, that is, a victory that may have produced few consequences for practice within English classrooms" as formalist close reading approaches continue to predominate in poetry instruction (Dressman & Faust, 2014, p. 53). Faber (2015) indicates that contemporary poetry pedagogy suffers from an overly analytical approach that reaches toward a given poem as if with a scalpel, as if it were not a poem at all. Billy Collins (1988, p. 58), a former United States poet laureate, warns against a seemingly all-too-familiar practice of tying a poem "to a chair with rope / and tortur[ing] a confession out of it," in his "Introduction to Poetry." An ongoing discussion regarding the influence of New Criticism and literary theory on perceptions of poetry as elite and inaccessible (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988; Xerri, 2014; Young, 2016) illuminates why the fear of insufficient knowledge and preparation plague the teacher in her poetry pedagogy (Sigvardsson, 2020). In his study, Benton (1999) reported that the overly analytical approach had become "almost endemic in teaching poetry" and that classroom reading was more like decoding an overly feminine, high-status answer key (p. 521). Of course, then, "we / do not admire what / we do not understand" (Moore, 1924, p. 27). Poetry, when encountered as an esoteric, remote "other," yields insecurity on the part of the teacher and disinterested distance on the part of the student despite perceptions of its value.

The second notable disjunction is that of the teachers' expressed personal enjoyment of poetry contrasted with their avoidance or dislike of it in the classroom (Lott, 1989; Skelton,

2006). While many teachers articulate that they value poetry (Benton, 1999) and feel insecure teaching it (Sigvardsson 2020; Benton 1999), they often also report high levels of personal affinity for the form. Skelton (2006) writes of her daily poetry habit, "poetry is in my bones. I was born with a love for it," yet in the next breath divulges that despite her passion, poetry was absent from her classroom practice (p. 25). So too with Joyce Greenberg Lott (1989), who admits to loving poetry so personally that she decided to "take the easy way out: [teaching] poetry in the traditional manner, distancing myself from the poems I taught" (p. 66). Here, it does not appear that teachers' positive personal engagement with the form guarantees a poetry-rich classroom, rather, it appears halted by some kind of adverse difference introduced by the school setting.

In discussing the place of poetry in their classroom practice, teachers in Benton's (1999) comprehensive study cited enjoyment and engagement as dimensions of the form they considered for their students yet found such goals in opposition to their traditional teaching strategies and school expectations. Benton synthesizes, "Teachers were also pulled in two directions by, on the one hand, the detailed analysis of poetry which they felt obliged to undertake for the purposes of examinations, and, on the other, by their desire to let the pupils explore it for themselves" (1999, p. 522). Instead of learning together and experiencing the poem in the present, we seem endlessly positioned outwards and forward toward a formidable, forthcoming test. Poetry does not seem to mystify individual teachers in their day-to-day lives the same way it does in the classroom setting.

As teachers work out their own poetry baggage, students find themselves caught in the crosshairs. Researchers repeatedly worry about student disinterest and resistance to poetry (Sigvardsson, 2020; Benton, 1999; Farber, 2015). Lott (1989) remarks that her students had never connected with poetry in the way that she had, would not choose to read a poem of their

own volition, and that “their encounters with poetry resembled their encounters with science” (p. 65). Skelton (2006) juxtaposes the ease with which students can name a favorite movie with the silence when asked the same about a poem. Unfamiliar with the form and hesitant to appreciate it, student perceptions of poetry only seem to depreciate with the analytical, “efferent” (Rosenblatt, 1976) reading approach. Put plainly, Lott reflects: “I learned that my students are not familiar enough with poetry to begin learning about it by analyzing it,” reframing her job as one that ought “to establish intimacy, to encourage them to want to take a closer look” (1989, p. 65). Unfortunately, we often employ more analysis as the mode with which we hope to increase student familiarity and enjoyment, ironically barring students from intimate engagement with poems in the process, thereby creating the problem in trying to rectify what we think is the problem.

In short, a general unease concerning poetry pervades the classroom space. Be it teacher hesitancy, students’ precarious preconceptions, or pressure to teach in a way that fixates on analysis, poetry seems a pedagogical headache. Some teachers go so far as to call it “soul destroying” (Benton, 1999, p. 529). Others cite concerns about overcoming student resistance, prejudice, and lack of confidence while feeling constrained to teach poetry in a way that runs antithetical to the enjoyment teachers know is possible (Benton, 1999, p. 530). While the perils mentioned here find resonance across other literary forms presented to students for study or school subjects more generally, poetry seems the peskiest of all the genres on offer for the ELA classroom.

1.2 Who's Verse is it Anyway?: Poetry Teaching's Ideological History

> "On our earth, before writing was invented, before the printing press was invented, poetry flourished. That is why we know that poetry is like bread; it should be shared by all, by scholars and by peasants, by all our vast, incredible, extraordinary family of humanity."
>
> —Pablo Neruda, "Poetry Like Bread" (1988, p. xv)

> "I believe the world is beautiful
> and that poetry, like bread, is for everyone."
>
> —Roque Dalton (1994) translated from the Spanish by Jack Hirschman, "Like You" (in Espada & Espada, 2000, p. 129)

Most salient in my research are the longstanding ways in which the English education field talks *about* poetry in the ELA classroom. To ground my inquiry in its context and its predecessors, I build on the work of Mark Faust and Mark Dressman in their extensive study of 530 articles published on the teaching of poetry in *English Journal* between 1912 and 2005, at least 226 of which were written by secondary English teachers. In this historical review, Faust and Dressman (2009) point to two main ideological conceptions of poetry, formalist and populist, while detailing the normative presumptions—the *ought*ness of teaching poetry—accompanying each of these postures.

The *formalist* camp grounded its practices in "a rigorous and intellectually challenging theory of textuality" (2014, p. 58) and, in the tradition of Russian Formalism, characterized poems as self-contained, revered art objects worthy of academic study. In the *formalist* classroom, the teacher's role was to select critically acclaimed "great" poems that would then be rightly understood by the students as "crystallizations of Anglophone civilization and culture that exemplify the best of the English language's power and range of expression" and sites for

"rigorous and respectful studies of rhyme, meter, and literary allusion" (2009, p. 116). Understanding literature "rightly" as a cultural and superior "crystallization" all but exposes *formalism*'s roots in an elitist and proudly imperialist intellectual milieu—the power of the English language a sign of civilizational progress and the naturalness of modern European superiority over the rest. For the *formalist*, poems were entities for which correct interpretations (and tastes) existed.

Citing Henry C. Paul's 1912 *EJ* article, Dressman and Faust (2014) exemplify the *formalist* approach to the how of poetry pedagogy: "That every student early in his high-school course should learn the simpler matters of metrics, together with illustrative lines, and should learn them as thoroughly as ever he did his multiplication tables, seems to be so obvious as scarcely to need statement" (Paul, 1912, p. 521). The *formalist* approach to poetry was objective, separable, scientific, and fixated on formal elements and close reading exercises, especially in the New Criticism boom of the 1930s through the 1960s. While Dressman and Faust remark that *populist* and *formalist* orientations towards poetry pedagogy alternated quite evenly in the pages of *EJ* from 1912-1970, the *formalist* "emphasis on close reading of texts was virtually the only fully articulated approach to reading poetry" represented in *EJ* during this period (2014, p. 52).

What Dressman and Faust (2014) deem the *populist* approach coexists in contrast with and as "a counter-hegemonic movement" (2014, p. 58) against the *formalist* strand of poetry pedagogy. While the *populist* approach was not systematically articulated as a distinctive position during 1912-1970, an informal invocation of its values is a frequent occurrence within the pages of *EJ.* Since the inception of the journal, the *populist* orientation aligned itself more with progressive educational values instead of those heavily influenced by New Criticism. Poetry, in the *populist*'s frame, was not hallowed as a sacred cultural artifact to be delicately

dissected and properly prized for its greatness. Instead, a poem belonged to its reader as an expression of popular culture and could be "adapted, cut up, borrowed from, parodied, and played with in all sorts of ways" (2009, p. 117). Predominantly promoted by K-12 teachers as opposed to university professors, *populist* orientations toward poetry encouraged students to use the form as they wished[4] (Dressman & Faust, 2014, p. 42). Here, we might hear Neruda and Dalton, that poetry, like bread, is meant to be shared by all. Students were encouraged to write their own poetry and build enjoyment of the form as young readers by collecting, organizing, parodying, or performing poems as well as tying poetry to other kinds of literary texts or music.

The 1970s and 1980s saw *populist* orientations towards poetry pedagogy start to take more of a hold in the pages of *EJ*. Articles reported that student engagement increased "when new poetic forms and experiential approaches were tried" (2014, p. 52). As *populist* concerns were primarily for "playfulness, diversity, and reader empowerment" (p. 58), this way of teaching thrived in the anti-authoritarian political milieu of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the theoretical inheritance of Rosenblatt's reader-response theory, *populism* "with its focus on student-centeredness rather than text-centeredness would become the defining discourse of the 'good' teacher, and Formalism its antithesis" (p. 59).

What Dressman and Faust explicate are the practices that make legible the sense of each pedagogical position, freighted with ideological division—for example, *formalist* close reading practices and *populist* free-writing sessions wherein students write their own poetry. Further, I again mention Dressman and Faust's (2014) insight that even though the *populist* reader-response approach to poetry prevailed in the pages of *EJ* after 1970, this seemed to "represent a

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[4] The difference between teachers and professors here feels an important distinction to make regarding material conditions. Professors are not working class. Thus, their pedagogical priorities seem to emerge from their respective professional environments and practices.

pyrrhic victory for that orientation, that is, a victory that may have produced few consequences for practice within English classrooms" as formalist close reading approaches continued to predominate in classroom poetry instruction in the United States in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (p. 53). Practices indicate ideological commitments with far more accuracy than the words used to describe them. Thus, even if the field, as illustrated by *EJ* and common rhetoric alike, *says* it is *populist* in its commitments—for example, striving to welcome students to the page with a focus on student personal connection and fostering empathy—its actions and realities denote otherwise. The declaration of a "pyrrhic victory" for *populism* means that teaching practices speak a truer, and for Dressman and Faust, worse state of affairs: a field stuck in *formalist* practices of the past or a field caught in limbo where poetry teaching accomplishes neither the goals of *formalism* nor *populism*.

Dressman and Faust (2014) outline the challenges poetry pedagogy faced in the first two-thirds of *EJ*'s history, 1912-1970, the first of which included a lack of cross-pollination from the two camps of *formalism* and *populism*—neither of which ever fully prevailed as the standardized approach. Though a great deal of specific, siloed conversation circulated about the teaching of poetry, the two points of view never sought to synthesize or commune outside of vague disparaging references, operating "much like a televised political debate" (p. 49). Dressman and Faust conclude that both *formalism* and *populism* had a keen awareness of their own side's "fatal flaws," (p. 49) respectively restraining them from productive dialogue.

Even occasionally admitted by its advocates, *formalist* approaches had the potential to foster a rancid hatred of poetry in students. Dressman and Faust (2014, p. 49) cite Robert Burroughs' description of the effect *formalist* approaches to poetry have on students, "first of all, they really hate poetry. It's not that they just say they hate it; they really do" (1977, p. 50), and

Klise S. King's brusque admittance that teaching classic poetry in high school fails to engage students as "a rather large group of pupils claim that they do not understand such poetry and that they get little pleasure from reading it" (1941, p. 36). Burroughs' and King's words echo Ben Lerner's (2016) observation that "many more people agree they hate poetry, than can agree what poetry is" and what United States Poet Laureate, Billy Collins (2012), later humorously dubbed as student "anti-poetry deflector shields." Moore's "we / do not admire what / we cannot understand" (1924, p. 27) resounds in refrain. Teachers, frustrated by *formalist* poetry teaching's lack of success in showcasing the glories of the English language in a way as to capture their students, decry teaching poetry as a hopelessly agonizing endeavor.

Conversely, *populist* poetry teaching efforts during the first two-thirds of *EJ* also had their pitfalls. When holistically examining all of the *populist* articles from the period, Dressman and Faust (2014) found that authors made plain the "occasional or marginal circumstances that provoked (and permitted) their abandonment of standard curricular approaches" (p. 50). Whether because their students were not college-bound (O'Connor, 1918), it was just a summer course (Briggs, 1960), the students could hardly understand "the more symbolic parts of Dick and Jane stores" (Briggs, 1960, p. 311), or the students were extraordinarily gifted and poetry was a playful reward (Fenn, 1936), *populist* presentations of poetry teaching were riddled with rationalizations, minimizations, and insecurity. As a result, they failed to educate *all* students.

Other challenges in this specific literacy era for the teaching of poetry came from a scarcity of available and diverse resources. In the first decade of *EJ*, the "overwhelming majority of articles" cited Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* (1898) as their only source for poetry, a collection wherein the most recent poems hailed from the Victorian and British Romantic periods (2014, p. 50). In the 1920s, when "modern" poetry boomed with the concurrent work of Langston Hughes,

Claude McKay, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Carl Sandburg, Countee Cullen, Sara Teasdale, and Robert Frost (to name a few) and the publication of *The New Era in American Poetry* (1919) by Louis Untermeyer, white male authors constituted a hegemonic hold over the poetry taught in classrooms — chiefly Robert Frost who was "by far the most featured poet" through the 1930s, 1940s, and into the 1950s and 1960s (Dressman & Faust, 2014, p. 50). The first fifty years of *EJ*'s articles also expose a disgraceful exclusion of Black, indigenous, and poets of color. Dressman and Faust chart a sparse *three* inclusions of poets of color in the journal before the 1970s: Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, and James Weldon Johnson in 1916, 1945, and 1954 respectively (p. 51). "Dream Motif in Contemporary Negro Poetry," by DeLois Garrett in 1970 was the first article wholly dedicated to poetry written by Black poets—a trend that began to reverse from this period onwards (Dressman & Faust, 2014, p. 51).

Whether or not ELA teachers fully conceptualize the historical inheritance or ideological contours of their classroom practices, such features come to bear on the choices teachers make in literary instruction, the ways of *doing* the lessons, units, assessments, and curriculum. Languaging poetry pedagogy's ideological inheritance captures the discourse at work in the field, its precedence, and the sometimes divergent ways in which poetry instruction is conceptualized. A fuller picture of the field, however, might turn to the actual doings and the everyday ways teachers and students work with literature. Studying practice, both in light of and separate from the predominant discourse around poetry pedagogy, might explain the "pyrrhic victory" of populist approaches promoted in the field's leading journal when juxtaposed against prevailing pedagogical approaches.

What I want to consider are practices *with* poetry in the classroom. In forthcoming chapters, my larger inquiry will describe such practices and the ways in which they might engage

with *populist* and *formalist* approaches to literature and its teaching while observing how this framework alone grants us an incomplete understanding. The binary of *formalism* and *populism*, though often helpful in articulating an ostensibly obvious ideological divide in the discourse, is limited. Relying solely on the two terms as discrete and separate frameworks of practice fails to account for the variety and multiplicity extant in the ways poetry can be, is, or "ought" to be taught. Accepting *formalism* and *populism* as diametrically opposed to one another obscures their interdependence and misses the overlap of their goal; while advocates of *formalism* and *populism* as ideologies do not share the same purported goals, teachers of poetry likely do.

We might observe how the concepts of *formalism* and *populism* are more interdependent than their advocates like to notice. Think of a teacher of poetry, or literature more broadly, working out of a *populist* framework in the hopes of engaging and empowering her students. In the teacher's goals lies an implicit claim about what poetry ought to be. While they may assume a looser and less narrowly dogmatic grip on what counts as poetry than those they tar as *formalists*, or more colloquially as elitists, they bring a set of normative presumptions to the teaching of poetry whether they intend to or not. By talking about poetry, the teacher and student rely on a concept of what poetry is—and thus assent to some degree of formal, shared use of poetry as a concept. Conversely, a teacher cannot teach a highly articulated understanding of those formal elements—a la *formalism*—without some belief in the goodness of poetry—a goodness one assumes should not be reserved for a tiny sliver of the elite. As such, *populism* demands form, and *formalism* relies on a belief in popular goodness, even if rejecting a *vulgar* popularity. For even if a teacher is a *formalist* in pedagogical persuasion, any teaching of poetry is an attempt to make it more popular—to have more students understand, appreciate, and potentially become fluent with the use and reading of poetry. The very practice of teaching is a

popularizing activity. Yet, this might be too simple a reading, leaning back into the binary. I wonder, for example, about how egalitarian *formalist* pedagogy was and is, especially in the early twentieth century. More bluntly, does the *formalist* consider poetry "good" for the public because it has the capacity to civilize? Perhaps not consciously so—yet perhaps the ideological baggage of *formalism* still haunts our pedagogy. If broadening the number of readers is an effect of teaching poetry in every case, popularizing it alone is not likely the only possible motivating factor for *formalist* instruction. All to say, the binary categories are knotty and complex as they have to do with ways of reading, teaching, and conceptualizing art. While distinct, and helpfully so in our considerations of the ideological inheritance of poetry education, *formalism* and *populism* cannot be understood in isolation.

While limited, the formalist-populist framework, elucidated and meticulously tabbed by Dressman and Faust, is helpful for getting our bearings in the complicated conversations about what it means to teach literature, specifically poetry. In my mission to describe the teaching of poetry as a social practice in the classroom, I will utilize this distinction for its analytical purchase with an awareness of its deficiencies. My analysis, thus, takes up this binary like a ladder to be tossed away upon ascent.[5] With a view to practice, I take up the social, material, affective, and personally formative dimensions of teachers' work with poetry in the classroom in hopes of getting clearer on poetry's educational possibilities. To pursue this inquiry, I draw on the concept and vocabulary of practice theory, wondering how doing so helps make sense of poetry in the English Language Arts classroom space and highlights the possibility for increased teacher agency.

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[5] This ladder analogy is used by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921/2013). See chapter 3 for a further treatment of Wittgenstein's thought as it pertains to practice.

1.3 "The Incarnate Now" (Lawrence, 1920): Poetry in the Present Tense

> Because we want to make meaning.
>
> Of something.
>
> to say something.
>
> Of value.
>
> — Kate Gale (2000, p. 126)

Similar to Dressman and Faust's method, I conducted a preliminary chronological skim through the archive of *English Journal* Volumes 95 (2005) to 111 (2021). I read for title and content, identifying 36 pertinent articles across the 16 years that mentioned poetry, poetics, poetry teaching, or any title that might resonate with poetic approaches to teaching English, not including original poetry, following Dressman and Faust's (2014) data collection process. I then diverged slightly from Faust and Dressman, electing not to group the articles by *populism* and *formalism*. Though this distinction provided a useful heuristic for Dressman and Faust's analysis, I wanted to work out of a different, less dichotomous framework. The two terms, the poles of *formalism* and *populism*, naming approaches to teaching poetry are not my exact interest. Poetry, in the classroom and otherwise, does not feel so neatly tamable. It is what surrounds those terms, the pedagogical priorities and the nature of teaching poetry itself, that interests me. To re-conceive of how to make sense of the articles, I sought a framework that did not attempt to tame the content; I utilized principles of Karen Barad's agential realism, embedded in a larger field of feminist new materialist scholarship, and specifically their concepts of diffraction and entanglement. On the whole, agential realism rethinks binary logic in a range of contexts and posits an ontological turn towards new materialism and posthumanism. Working against rigid dualisms such as human/non-human, material/discursive, natural/cultural, scientific/social-

material practices, agency/structure, idealism/materialism, and constructivism/realism (2007, p. 26), Barad rethinks of taken-for-granted binaries in myriad contexts and helps us reconsider correlative connectivity. I take up Barad's framework to think through questions about the extent to which the heuristic of *populism* and *formalism* inhabits, or might inhabit, an intertwined reality that overruns easy compartmentalization. Thus, I grouped the articles in an effort to capture potential throughlines of interconnectivity, letting categories emerge that stood to include *populist* and *formalist* priorities but give language to categories beyond them.

Diffraction, a term classically associated with the study of waves, aims to capture combinations and overlap. Building upon Haraway, Barad describes diffraction as "ha[ving] to do with the way waves combine when they overlap and the apparent bending and spreading of waves that occurs when waves encounter an obstruction" (Barad, 2007, p. 74). Think of multiple pebbles simultaneously dropped into a pond: the ripples do not remain distinct from each other, they combine, overlap, bend, and spread as they radiate outwards both separately and together. In this encounter, the outgoing wave pattern differs from the incoming pattern; yet they are not easily separable as the original wave combines and overlaps in such a way that it persists in the outgoing pattern.

The concept of diffraction helps us think through the ways in which something might be both distinct and overlapping, how inseparable and enmeshed matter might be if we adjust our lens through which to consider it as such. Diffraction is both a theoretical underpinning of this chapter and a methodological approach wherein we can read "insights through one another in attending to and responding to the details and specificities of relations of difference and how they matter" (p. 811). Reading insights through one another creates space beyond dualistic thinking to probe for new possibilities and understandings of the complexities inherent in the

teaching of poetry (and, rather, in poetry as a thing in itself). Reading diffractively prompts me to wonder and trace how the historical strands of *formalism* and *populism* might possess co-constitutive, inseparable relational dimensions while remaining distinct. Further, reading diffractively helps me strive to better articulate the parts that constitute the whole that is contemporary poetry pedagogy, capturing at once a more holistic and more granular picture of the present field. Like Dressman and Faust, I sorted the articles into potential categories based on their titles before moving into a full reading and annotating process within each category. The neat original categories did not hold, nor did I want or anticipate them to do so. The article categories shifted and morphed throughout the process and pieces existed across multiple categories. Though I identified some overarching trends, like poetry's connection to classroom technologies and digital literacy, the differentiated layers I could limn were poetry as invitation, poetry as aesthetic dialogue, poetry as power, poetry as performance, and poetry as connectivity. Though in my initial reading the articles and my thematic categories seemed to range inside of a *populist* understanding of poetry pedagogy, further consideration of the *populist* and *formalist* distinction as I read began to muddle and entwine.

Particularly prominent in the 1990s, *Populist* poetry articles in *EJ* "advocated instructional approaches that broke fully with the image of a poem as a self-contained work of art" (2014, p. 52). Conceptions of what it means to study a poem, like texts more broadly, broke from *formalist* straitjackets and took on the malleability and porosity of living discourse. *EJ* authors on poetry teaching advocated for practices where poems were juxtaposed with paintings or novels that "strongly suggested the development of a new image of poems as texts shot-through or permeated by the semiotic traces of other texts and cultural times" (Dressman & Faust, 2014, pp. 52-53). At the end of their 2014 study, Dressman and Faust acknowledged

budding trends of parody writing, dramatic group poetry readings, poetry slams, and teaching rap and hip-hop as poetry (p. 64). They articulate what they see as a promising dimension of such emerging practices in that their means are *populist,* but they aim to develop “students’ comprehension of figurative language and of the relationship between a poem’s ideas and the structure and sound of its language” a la *formalism* (p. 64). The increasing simultaneity of *populist* and *formalist* priorities in poetry pedagogy does indeed play itself out in subsequent *EJ* poetry articles. Thus, this closing remark on how emerging trends in poetry pedagogy embrace elements across the ideological divide prompted me to read the 2005-2021 archive with a theoretical frame that allowed for the two historical approaches to remain distinct without neglecting the ways in which they entangle and inform each other.

In many *EJ* articles since 2005, authors and teachers have largely championed contemporary poetry, especially in teaching scenarios where the students use existing poems as a springboard for their own creative writing (Kennedy, 2015; Brannon, 2012; Wissman, 2009). Another notable burgeoning trend was poetry’s connection to classroom technologies and digital literacy (Reed, 2017; Lynch, 2015; Emert, 2015), underscored by the way in which digital poetry can increase a student’s sense of a global perspective in our globalized, intricately connected world (Vardell, 2019). Building from the work of Dressman and Faust, the following sections detail five emerging layers to poetry pedagogy, attentive to the ways the historical ideologies of *populism* and *formalism* at times entangle, at times remain distinct, and continue to inform instruction, as represented in *EJ* from 2005-2021: poetry as invitation, poetry as aesthetic dialogue, poetry as power, poetry as performance, and poetry as connectivity.

Poetry As Invitation (It's Not Scary We Promise!)

Teachers and authors in *EJ* are still out to help counter student anxieties and assumptions about poetry (Apol & Macaluso, 2016), hoping to promote its inclusivity (Kryder, 2006). Amidst the sharing of strategies that help "unteach" poetry in ways that make the form new for the students, teachers like Perry (2006) warn other teachers of the perils of making poetry hostile for students: "Poetry is a powerful teaching tool. Let's not be guilty of dissecting it so there is nothing left but the poem's skeleton" (p. 113). Perry's admonishment reminds us that warped versions of *formalist* teaching approaches to poetry that fixate on correct answers and tearing a poem to bits still exist in contemporary United States classrooms.

Other ways of inviting students into poetry include promoting its joy and emotional texture. For example, Bintz (2012) uses parody for an experience that blends humor and poetic language. Promoting play while correcting misperceptions of poetry based on an aversion built through early experiences, Cobb (2006) writes in "Playing with Poetry's Rhythm: Taking the Intimidation Out of Scansion" of helping her students to rediscover poetry's profound sense of rhythm. Kyle Vaughn (2015) similarly argues against prior conceptions of poetry as something to be analyzed rather than experienced, positing that a student should never be asked what a given poem means but about what the poem is stirring up in them — in their philosophical wanderings, dream life, emotions, or shadow selves (p. 16). Each of these writers continues in the legacy of *populist* orientations toward the teaching of poetry, rejecting the lingering ghosts of *formalist* approaches for something that yields more connectivity and freedom for students.

Poetry As Aesthetic Dialogue

Many articles in the last fifteen years of *EJ* advocate for an intertextual dialogue between poems and other forms, be that art or literature. Perry (2006) lists a series of assignments aimed

at welcoming students more fully into poetry, one of which is for students to “respond to literature through poetry” (p. 111). This approach is mentioned again when Steenstra (2006) describes prompting reluctant students to write poetry as a way of responding to other forms of literature. He later advocates for the practices, arguing that “writing poems about literature is an authentic activity that can foster deep knowledge of the work being studied” (p. 102). Moorman (2006) connects art and poetry in her classroom, having students respond to art through verse in order to provide “opportunities for personally meaningful experiences with poetic language and aesthetic images” (p. 46). No matter the route of connectivity, poetry as a form seems uniquely conducive to aesthetic dialogue. Describing poetry as a catalyst for active engagement with other art forms, Kryder (2006) writes, “poetry, like all the arts, is experiential, and as such bids us join together with other learners at all times” (p. 35). Perhaps it is its experimental quality that begs its readers to move it around the aesthetic stratosphere or perhaps it has to do with its capacity to grapple with universal themes in a condensed space, but poetry seems a ripe medium for students to authentically engage in the literary arts.

The commitment to embracing poetry as a potential springboard for the creation of student work is a *populist* one. In the intertextual dialogue between poems and other works or in the student’s own work, the text of study is not sacrosanct, it is meant for the student to respond to and interact with. The text belongs to the student. Yet, these approaches do not forsake the original text itself and, in the sentiment of Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde (1891), the text is the starting block: “To the critic the work of art is simply a suggestion of a new work of his own” (p. 71). Aesthetic dialogue and literary creation involve some sort of “theory of textuality” (Dressman & Faust, 2014, p. 58), some deep knowledge of the text in question in order to work from it, to follow the “suggestion” (Wilde, 1891, p. 71) toward new work. In short, this kind of

imaginative play and active engagement with the text marries *formalist* notions of the text as worthy of study in and of itself with *populist* commitments to student voice.

Poetry as Power

A newer discussion in the pages of *EJ* during the last fifteen years is the proclamation of poetry as a powerful force in the classroom. Though true in the way that poetry empowers personal articulation (Van Whyte, 2006), more contemporary discussions in *EJ* boast of poetry's power in critical stances as well as rewriting oppressive identity narratives. In Jeannie M. Staples' (2008) classroom, poetry aids in the development of critical stances as students construct "a collaborative poem to confront repressive thinking" (p. 81). Poetry can also be a source to promote empathy, powerfully described in the context of Xerri and Xerri Aguis's (2015) classroom wherein they used poetry as a means to develop empathy for asylum seekers in Malta, a divisive issue at the time of their writing. To help achieve this, Xerri and Xerri Aguis's students read multicultural poetry which acted as "an effective means of galvanizing empathy" (p. 72). In direct confrontation against restrictive patterns or inspiring empathy for a humanitarian crisis, poetry served a tangible role in the lives of the students engaging with it.

Further, in "Reading and Becoming Living Authors: Urban Girls Pursuing a Poetry of Self-Definition," Kelly Wissman (2009) read poems like Nikki Giovanni's "Ego Tripping" and Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" with her students in order to engage them with works that "presented a strong sense of self that critiqued, took on, and ultimately prevailed over the societal voices that would limit and demean" (p. 40). Later, they would write their own poetry inspired by these exemplars as a means to more fully represent themselves. Similarly incorporating Maya Angelou's poetry as a mentor text, Pablo C. Ramirez in "Lingua Anglia: Bridging Language and Learners: Engaging Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Youth through

Performance Poetry" (2014) discusses how his students became "critical thinkers guided by culturally relevant poetry and their own lived experiences" (p. 76). Wissman and Ramirez's classroom centers Black and Latinx student experiences with poetry and the ways in which the form can be a liberatory force.

Poetry's power to rewrite oppressive identities becomes a recurring theme in *EJ* and the focal point of Amanda Rigell and Arianna Banack's (2019) discussion of the role poetry played in helping their students resist common stereotypes about their Appalachian community while providing them language to forge their own sense of identities as well as in Samuel Jaye Tanner's (2015) utilization of poetry as a theatrical tool for student inquiry into race and whiteness. Too, poetry's ability to recast societal structures is explored anew in "Reading Poetry for Critical Reflection on Consumer Behavior," where Scimone (2010) details his guided discussions of the poetry of Marge Piercy, Richard Wilbur, and Howard Nemerov to foster conversations among his students wherein the poems serve as the entry point for unpacking social issues of consumption. One of the most significant new strands of *EJ* writing about poetry pedagogy is its embrace of the form as a source for transformative societal change in areas—like racial identity—that have been made far more explicit than before.

Again, *populist* priorities reign in this orientation. Particularly in the counter-hegemonic dimensions of *populism*, the *EJ* discussions regarding poetry as a place of power or empowerment, squarely reject the *formalist* conception that poems ought to be regarded as jewels that "captured the genius of the English language and Anglophone civilization in a particular period of its history" (Dressman & Faust, 2014, p. 46). Since 2005, the pages of *EJ* have not embraced what might still be the approach of many classrooms: that poetry is synonymous with revered white, male, largely British particular conception of a looming

Western "canon." Yet, this *populist* orientation does not exist without special acknowledgment for what the structure and form of poetry itself offers, sidelining but not fully abandoning the *formalist* valuing of the text qua text as authors sought to curate particular poems that represented a specific genre, tradition, or theme (Dressman & Faust, 2014).

Poetry as Performance

In a growing sense of curiosity about student identity and sociopolitical, sociocultural realities, poetry pedagogy has broken from "the dead white guys" and genre-hopped into like-forms of rap, hip-hop, and lyrics. Similarly, recent writing has promoted poetry as a place for performance, a means to relish in the musicality of language—emphasizing hearing and performing rather than close reading and explicating. In a culturally responsive teaching framework, Stairs (2007) discusses the ways in which two student teachers integrated "rap lyrics, jazz and blues music, the poetry of Langston Hughes, discussion of figurative language, and analysis and imitation activities to examine elements of racism and prejudice during the Harlem Renaissance" (p. 37). That poetry as a form embodies the kind of lyricism and rhythm commensurate and comparable to the musical genres rap, jazz, or blues affords it an expanded place in the classroom. Lynch (2007) describes how students wrote couplets and turned them into group rap lyrics after drawing connections between Chaucer, Eminem, and sociopolitical issues. Though many teachers seem to employ music or rap as a bridge between the students and poetry, some, like Lauren Leigh Kelly in "Hip-Hop Literature: The Politics, Poetics, and Power of Hip-Hop in the English Classroom" (2013), advocate for the study of hip-hop's poetics in its own right, not as an instrumental gateway to something else.

Highlighting poetry's audial qualities extends beyond new ways of reading and conceiving of the form. Promotion of spoken word poetry slams pervades *EJ* (Hamilton, 2019;

Woodward & Coppola, 2018; Williams, 2015; Schwalb, 2006), especially as they intersect with social justice activism (Burr, 2017). Poetry, in its contemporary manifestations, seems to consist of a “cross-hatched picture of intercultural borrowings, affinities, and flows” (Ramazani, 2009, p. 14) wherein dialogic alternatives to monologic models thrive. This welcomes boundary-crossing between poetry and other adjacent genres of rap and hip-hop, genres worthy of poetic embrace in their own right and in the ways they relate to traditional conceptions of poetics. Building on the contemporary emphases of poetry as aesthetic dialogue and poetry as power, pedagogically favoring the performance-based elements of poetry accentuates and re-enlivens the enduring quality that poetry is meant to be heard.

Much like previous categories, the binary poles of *formalism* and *populism* do not hold. Of all the aforementioned layers, that of hip-hop, rap, and spoken word inhabits a particularly entwined and co-constitutive space. While on its face *populist*, Barad’s diffractive reading, wherein “insights [are read] through one another in attending to and responding to the details and specificities of relations of difference and how they matter” (2007, p. 811), helps uncover a hidden, more dynamic reading. The *formalist* prioritization of “the rigorous study of poetry’s formal elements, such as meter, rhyme scheme, literary allusion, and form” (Dressman & Faust, 2014, p. 46) shines anew with possibility when read through the *populist* orientation toward student voice and experience, counter-hegemonic conceptions of what literature can and should be taught, and that the art object is meant for play and creation. As the *EJ* articles particular to this section illuminate, a pedagogy that takes up poetry’s formal elements need not be mutually exclusive and held apart from that of a pedagogy that champions student voice, taste, and performance—in fact, the enmeshing of specific elements in the *formalist* and *populist* traditions,

only seems to stay nearer to the potential complex realities inherent in poetry as a form and in the dynamic space of the classroom.

Poetry as Connectivity

In an increasingly heteroglossic (Bakhtin, 1981) and pluralistic world, poetry's capacity for "cross cultural knotting" (Ramazani, 2009, p. 12), yields the final new category of a porous space for generative cross-cultural connections and, even, transnational imaginings that no longer confine themselves to strict boundaries. Writers in *EJ* explore poetry as a bridge for cultural gaps: between Americans and Norwegians, drawing on varying expressions of societal themes like assimilation and identity (Pasternak, 2006) as well as connective tissue for teens that live in disparate corners of the same city and school district, as Schwalb (2006) explored in her article, "East of the River: Crossing Borders through Poetry in Middle Schools." In cases where the border traversing and connectivity are between the students and fictional worlds, poetry still comes as a means of transportation. In her high school classroom, Huie (2006) prompts her students to write personal shadow poems to better grasp universal themes in their World Literature texts, like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* or Afro-Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén's "Ballad of the Two Grandfathers" with which they may not immediately resonate.

Thus, it is not just that poetry offers a way to respond to other art forms, but that poetry offers its readers and writers a powerful form for connection. As such, I think of poets writing in response to other poets and poems, for example, two that I discuss with my students: Clint Smith's poem for New Orleans, "There Is a Lake Here" (2016) written after Jamaal May's poem for Detroit, "There Are Birds Here" (2016); and José Olivarez's poem, "Wealth" (2024) after Lucille Clifton, pairing with her poem "Atlas" (1992). Or, to cite a poem discussed earlier, Billy Collins's "Litany" (2003a, p. 69) borrows its opening two lines, "You are the bread and the

knife, / The crystal goblet and the wine," from Greg Bailey's translation from the French of an untitled poem by Jacques Crickillon (Applefield, 1996, p. 138). Poetry's pension for internal dialogue among its community is an invitation for the student poet as well. One year, my students wrote in response to local poet Mary Kinzie's "First Passion" (2007), moved by the poem's staggered spacing that enacts an anxious breathlessness and conveys the experience of a sudden surge of emotion.[6] The way *EJ* imagines poetry as a mechanism to communicate our humanity to each other—not just a site for the posthumous study of how poets of yesteryear described facets of the human condition—offers teachers a far more participatory angle on poetry's referentiality. In other words, instead of allowing referential allusions or the form itself to estrange the reader, the poetry classroom says the student is free to enter the living tradition. Whether connecting across wide sociocultural and geopolitical differences, across genres, across time periods, or across the classroom, there seems an increasing sense among teachers of poetry that the form ought not alienate its readers but restore them to each other.

Contemporary Threads

Dressman and Faust affirm that culture and tradition, "not history per se, and even less the best practice narratives of professional journals like *EJ"* adequately explain "what and how poetry is and was taught in U. S. English classrooms" (Dressman & Faust, 2014, p. 54). Though the last fifteen years of poetry writing in *EJ* have brought exciting new inflections of *populism*'s embrace of poetry as an open text ready for the reader to transact with it in multiplicities previously unthinkable in the history of literacy education, a full and ready integration of poetry in our English classrooms has yet to be realized. Likely, the new imaginings and practices for

[6] For a thorough description of this lesson and an example of student work, please see Davis, M. (2022). You Never Forget Your Firsts: Making Memories Vividly Present with Mary Kinzie's "First Passion." *Teachers & Writers Magazine*.

poetry present in *EJ*—conceptualizing poetry as a space for inclusivity, play, dialogue, empowerment, justice, activism, and connectivity—might represent a similarly "pyrrhic victory" for widespread classroom practice. Poetry teaching has shapeshifted in attempts to maintain its relevance and usefulness, redefining and defending itself against more traditional, teacher-led practices. Though other genres seem to have usurped literacy methods from bygone eras more readily, poetry, in its longstanding and often mystifying prismatic complexity, continues to force our innovation and occasional gripes, asking us again and again to figure new ways of making language indelibly beautiful to our students and poetry "a place for the genuine" (Moore, 1924, p. 27). Innovative recent writing in *EJ* attests to the many possibilities inherent in the form and the space of the English Language Arts classroom that are beginning to manifest—possibilities that do not so neatly separate the *formalist* and *populist* categories yet are steeped in their legacies—opening a new way forward to a more dynamic embrace of one of our language's oldest forms of expression.

I want to turn away from discursive attention again to observe, feel, and *be* with teachers, students, and poetry in the classroom. I want to witness the doings of how teachers innovate in their classroom work with poetry. If teachers are figuring new ways of making language indelibly beautiful to students and to themselves, I want to consider those practices and the ways in which those practices work to form their participants, particularly the teacher herself. Further, I want to look beyond individual activities with poetry and toward a horizon of practice, community, and the role of ritual in building both. Our time spent tracing the ongoing and negotiated tradition of teaching poetry is not wasted time. As I turn my attention toward conceiving of the teaching of poetry as a particular practice in later sections, a sense of its history is vital. Alasdair MacIntyre (2013) writes that to enter into a practice

> is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point. (p. 194)

To teach poetry is to engage, whether consciously or not, with the historical precedent of what it has meant to teach poetry—with the longstanding echoes of the debate between *populist* and *formalist* approaches just as much as the contemporary iterations that emphasize poetry as a form that allows for invitation, dialogue, empowerment, performance, and connection in the classroom. Teaching poetry means engaging with this history, engaging with it as a living practice that involves "ongoing arguments over what the practice is, what it is for, and what it can achieve" (Higgins, 2011, p. 68). The work of these pages is a way of engaging the living practice that is poetry teaching, inserting myself in the ongoing argument about what poetry experiences in the classroom might be for and make possible.

Caesura 1

Whether we want to read it or write it

Or let it screech off the lava of our lungs

Or seep into our quiet confines,

The Committee has met and decided,

How we feel and mean and plumb the well of

Words for that which stings. Never mind how

It all just makes a certain sort of sense

To describe what it is to be by

Tending careful to the wind, its invisibility

And its iambs, alive in the assonance—

How somehow saying it is to exist

And the poem can't but demand itself.

Chapter 2: Poetry as Site

One of the most significant challenges for both learners and teachers of poetry is that the form often feels so strange that it demands a more robust set of conceptual and interpretive tools than a piece of fiction or nonfiction prose might. We can imagine the eighth grader reading Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven" (1845) for the first time and trying to keep in mind allusion, alliteration, onomatopoeia, metaphor, meter, rhyme, simile, and personification. Though these formal elements are indeed necessary for a full experience of the poem, by centering them, the teacher and learner risk losing sight of the purpose of what they are doing—not just the why but the whole. Crudely, while *formalists* zoom in on these formal and technical dimensions of the poem, *populists* tend to jump to the poem's uses.

Having just reviewed a history of general arguments for how to teach a poem in the previous chapter, we are well-positioned to notice the ways poetry has come to be seen as the whole that it is within the contemporary educational environment. Historical conversations are necessary for positioning educators in the discursive, institutional, and rhetorical trajectories in which their teaching is situated. But to provide substance to our account of the practice of teaching poetry, we will need to get clearer on some of the reasons poetry is both a fruitful site of inquiry and a rich and necessary part of language. In a world which worships at the altar of efficiency, poetry often has to fight to display its value. While I find this situation lamentable, I would like to wager a response to this question asking after the value of poetry. My answer to this question depends on getting a clear view of the *whole*, both the whole of poetry and the whole practice of teaching it.

Thus, the practice-centered approach to poetry on which I focus hopes to center a sense of the poem *qua* poem before dividing it into its constituent parts or discussing the ways it might

be utilized. Is poetry just a vessel for learning about the formal elements of language? Ought it be crudely dissected into segments by those unaware of the power of its fullness? To borrow the language of gestalt thinking—a view that prioritizes perceiving entire patterns rather than itemized components—I am interested in the *whole* of both poetry and its teaching prior to their parts: "parts do not *become* parts, do not function *as* parts, until there is a whole *of which* they are parts" (Wertheimer, 1980, p. 213, emphasis original). Before teachers rush to partition poems in hopes that their students will better grasp tools for the formal dissection of language, we ought to consider the package in which these literary features are housed, i.e., the poem itself. Likewise, by abandoning ourselves to the debate between *formalist* and *populist* theoretical dispositions, we lose sight of the part that both *formalist* and *populist* emphases play in the whole of teaching poetry. Analyzing the goods of poetry as something to be taught—in essence, considering why the teacher presents her students with a poem at all—will allow us to better understand the practice of teaching poetry.

To consider the *whole* of teaching poetry as something made up of dynamic particulars but not contained by them necessitates a shift in how we see. We can get help from gestalt theory's emphasis on wholes as more than the sums of their parts. Jan Zwicky describes gestalt comprehension as that which asks questions about sight—how we see—and that to ask such questions is to take up something as a whole and to see, then, how that whole hangs together: "To say 'see' or 'perceive' or 'know,' in a scholarly context, is to invoke the whole apparatus" (2020, p. 10). An apparatus is a complex structure, a composite of many parts that function interdependently. Barad might capture this co-constitutive interrelation in their term entanglement,[7] which gets at something more comprehensive than interrelativity. Barad writes,

[7] Zwicky loosely hints at this potential connection: "I know next to nothing about quantum superposition and entanglement, or Rupert Sheldrake's morphic fields; but it seems to me remarkable that these allegedly inexplicable

"to be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair" (Barad, 2007, p. ix). It is not that separate parts are added together to make up an aggregate total, nor that discrete entities are entwined to form a determinate complex, rather, to see the gestalt is to recognize the more-than quality of a given complex, i.e., to see it as a meaningful whole. Calling a poem to mind, this sense of gestalt, or inter-determination of parts and wholes begins to take shape. A poem can prompt us to experience meaning, a kind of resonant "whoa" or "aha," giving us an impression of something beyond itself or new language for truths otherwise left latent. Further, this same poem is also made up of parts—line breaks, enjambment, iambs, images, metaphor, form, and so on. The poem likely *means* because of more than the sum of those discernable parts—it might jog a lost memory, soothe personal anxiety, or otherwise speak into our, the reader's, context in a way that surprises, quiets, or ignites. Even in my crude attempt to limn the parts that hang together to make the whole of a poem here, I find them insufficient. I feel the pull of a "yes, and," a desire to enumerate *ad nauseam* the subtle ways poems work—to keep trying to describe why it feels so important to bother with them, for ourselves and our work with students.

Identifying this gestalt approach to poetry is essential in recognizing the kind of signifier that it is and the way it communicates meaning. But attention on the gestalt of the poem also helps us identify reasons why the poem ought to be included within the classroom. While various pedagogical beliefs, frameworks, and techniques might be served through an engagement with poetry, our appreciation of the poem—and, thus, why we might include it in our classroom practice—is not limited to the aggregate of these reasons we can isolate and describe. The poem

phenomena appear to be characterized by the same interdetermination of parts and wholes that characterizes gestalts" (2020, pp. 50-51).

serves practical functions but to reduce its purpose to these is to miss the richer classroom fabric which it helps to weave.

Poetry, its somewhat elusive albeit valuable nature, is the heart of this project. I want to set aside space to attempt to distinguish why poetry—as an apparatus, a whole, an entangled reality—is the site for my questions. My inquiry might seem as though it could be made broader so as to consider the place of literature more generally in the English Language Arts classroom. It is not the case that I am turning to poetry metaphorically, as a symbol representative of the literary arts in general. Though, in distinguishing poetry from literature in these pages, I by no means intend to discredit the power of literature in the classroom.[8] There is *something* particular about poetry that distinguishes it from other forms of the language arts and makes it markedly potent and valuable to the ELA classroom. In this chapter, I turn to an examination of some of the reasons we may incorporate it in our classroom practices as well as, and often due to, the goods internal to its form. Besides poetry's sheer historical durability—a far older art form than the novel—as well as its geographical and cultural ubiquity, these goods include poetry's economy of form, symbolic register, inextricability from language, and ability to cultivate attention. Yet, the why of poetry is more than the sum of these parts. To help make sense of the goods of poetry at play within the classroom, I think alongside poets and Esther, Frank, and Maeve—high school English teachers for whom the classroom work of poetry is vibrant and honestly considered. Later, I develop these insights to examine how the form of poetry presents an advantageous site to consider the work of *practice* and the creation of community in the classroom.

[8] I doubt few would dispute the *power* of literature in the classroom—as our current, fraught headlines attest.

2.1 Poetry as Juice Concentrate

> "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree."
>
> —Ezra Pound (1931, p. 21)

The typical short length of poetry presents a unique opportunity for the teaching of literature. Students and teachers can take in more and produce more; poetry reaps a higher yield of exposure to and experimentation with literature due to its economy of form. As students learn and gain conceptual proficiency in a given area, they slowly build a repertoire of precedential models. For instance, an elementary student may develop a basic conception of poetry through nursery rhymes and, later, reading a poet like Shel Silverstein. A few years later, as a middle schooler, perhaps this same student is introduced to the work of Robert Frost. Silverstein, in this example, offers a precedential picture of what poetry is as well as a set of practical experiences so that a student engaging with Frost years later might recognize this new piece of literature *as* poetry that she can, hopefully, then appreciate, understand, and even reproduce. Precedents offer markers for future precedent recognition as well as models for how students might attempt their own precedent-making, i.e. writing their own poems. If a student's poetic precedents remain limited[9]—say, the few poems they have encountered are simplistically constructed rhyme schemes—the limited nature of their conceptual grasp of poetry might be revealed when presented with a Shakespearean sonnet in tenth-grade English Language Arts. While precedents for longer mediums such as the novel or a play are more difficult to incorporate into the precedential quiver, poetry's brevity means there are an array of potential precedents available

[9] In a previous small-scale qualitative research study, I interviewed three students from the high school where I had previously taught and each of them spoke to the absence of poetry throughout their schooling experience. Though this is anecdotal and a small glimpse, research supports that poetry's position in schooling does indeed tend toward scarcity rather than abundance. See Davis (2023) and, further Benton (1999) & Benton (2000).

for students to engage with and to expand their notions of literature's possibilities as well as increased opportunities for teachers to ask students to make their own precedents. If learning a concept involves taking up a trajectory, then the learner puts themselves within the line of precedent uses and looks to other competent uses of the concept, or in this case form. In the typical English Language Arts classroom, the student does not have time to write a novel, nor read enough novels to grasp the fullness of the genre. With poetry, the student can insert herself into the trajectory of precedence more easily.

Poetry's brevity is an asset to the ELA discipline more broadly. In a landscape where the English education field has rightfully grown far more intentional and justice-oriented in its text selection and instructional processes (Borsheim-Black & Tatiana Sarigianides, 2019; Ebarvia et al, 2020), poetry affords a breadth of exposure and a heightened possibility for multivocality than other literary genres. If literature is a primary tool for building empathy and for introducing students to voices from cultures both different from and reflective of their own, poetry ought to be a primary site for doing so. Maeve, after a few weeks of reading a daily poem to her students, commented similarly, realizing poetry presents an overlooked but ripe opportunity to make classroom text representation more equitable: "With the degree to which we are committed to diversifying their experiences with novels and short stories, I have not made that same commitment to poetry. I think it just kind of falls by the wayside as an afterthought, but this just feels like such an organic way to do it." If educators aim for increased diverse text experiences and increased exposure to historically marginalized voices in particular, it seems vital that students need more than a single, potentially tokenizing experience in order to realize this goal. If the teacher wants her student to understand different cultures, the student needs to be able to have more than a singular, passing convergence with them. In short, poetry is juice concentrate.

It is literature distilled. And, if we treat it as such, poetry—primarily due to its bite-size natural efficacy of form—becomes the ground from which we might best realize our pedagogical priorities.

The economy and condensed nature typical of poetry as a literary form precede and overlap with the contents of the following sections. In the words of American poet and essayist Jane Hirshfield, poetry is not merely juice concentrate but "the pressed oil of words:"

> And because it thinks by music and image, by story and passion and voice, poetry can do what other forms of thinking cannot: approximate the actual flavor of life, in which subjective and objective become one, in which conceptual mind and the inexpressible presence of things become one.
>
> Letting this wideness of being into ourselves, as readers or as writers, while staying close to the words themselves, we begin to find in poems a way of entering both language and being on their own terms. Poetry leads us into the self, but also away from it. [...] The pressed oil of words can blaze up into music, into image, into the heart and mind's knowledge. The lit and shadowed places within us can be warmed. (Hirshfield, 1997, p. 32)

Approximating the flavor of life, poetry's distilled expression becomes the teacher's vehicle to gesture to the inexpressible, to touch what other forms of thinking—certainly inclusive of the measurable forms of thinking so valued by contemporary education—cannot, and to engage herself and her students in wholeness. The typical white space of the page coupled with restrained, careful expression, waits unhurried for the reader's imagination and world to alight. To have such illumination at the ready is the English teacher's gift.

2.2 Traffics in Metaphor

In his book, *Why Poetry*—a title I could have as well borrowed for this chapter—Matthew Zapruder writes, “The original French symbolist poets—Baudelaire, Malarmé, Verlaine, Valéry, and Rimbaud—believed that the role of the poem was to bring out a usually dormant quality in language—the symbolic—in the deeper and more mysterious sense of that word” (2017, p. 167). Highlighting the capacity of poetry to point toward the abstract, felt sense, or intuition, distinguishes it from other forms of communication. The poem seems interested in something more subterranean, “deeper and more mysterious” in language and experience. This interest in meaning at a level beneath and beyond the empirical means that poetry traffics in metaphor. Poet Tony Hoagland calls metaphor, one of poetry’s most salient devices, “the raw uranium of poetry” and “that an urge to claim wild similarities is one of the earliest markers of the poetic spirit” (2006, p. 22). Poetry is inseparable from the work of metaphor, metaphor from the poetic. If metaphors are “only the more striking examples of something going on all the time in the changing and holistic semantic network that constitutes language” (Arbib & Hesse, 1986, p. 151), then poetry needles at language’s most essential and expansive properties. Take, for example, Maya Angelou’s caged bird, Sylvia Plath’s lady Lazarus, the road Frost did not take, or Dylan Thomas’s night of death into which he refused to go gently. Or perhaps Emily Dickinson’s (1891) classic: “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers— / That perches in the soul— / And sings the tune without the words— / And never stops— at all—”. Or Langston Hughes’ “Well, son, I’ll tell you: / Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair. / It’s had tacks in it, / And splinters, / And boards torn up” (1922/2001). Or Shakespeare’s (1609) familiar question, “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” These metaphors present us with otherworldly equations, enlivening language and image anew, plumbing at truths beneath the surface.

The study of these metaphors and poetry more broadly, as metaphor *is* its language, lends itself to a different way of knowing. Hirshfield describes metaphors as those that “get under your skin by ghosting right past the logical mind,” “think with the imagination and the senses,” and “give words a way to go beyond their own meaning” (Hirshfield, 2012). If the metaphor skates past the logical mind, we can infer the metaphor is one of the poet’s devices for accessing something—to move past the logical and into the symbolic. Here, I return to gestalt thinking as a way to describe how metaphor allows the reader to experience gestalts—to see, perceive, or know by “invok[ing] the whole apparatus” (Zwicky, 2020, p. 10). Experiencing gestalts might mean grappling with the relationships among the parts to see the whole or, rather, the relationship between the metaphoric image and the abstraction that it stands for. Zwicky, among others, calls upon Rubin’s Vase (Rubin, 1915) to exemplify how metaphor and gestalt comprehension work together: “The relevance of this figure for poetry is obvious—it’s an example of metaphor in action, of seeing one thing (two faces in profile) as another (a chalice) on the basis of profound, inalienable, shared structure” (2020, p. 13). The reader or perceiver makes meaning by accessing symbolic resonances that allow for the faces and the chalice to exist together. There need not be a scientific explanation of how Rubin’s Vase works, a piecemeal description of the ways in which the respective brow bones of the profiles double as symmetrical notches in the body of the chalice where one might grab it to drink. To appeal to such an empirical explanation would ruin the experience, akin to having to explain a joke. Seeing one thing as another, glimpsing the shared structure, is an immediate and satisfying “click” of meaning.

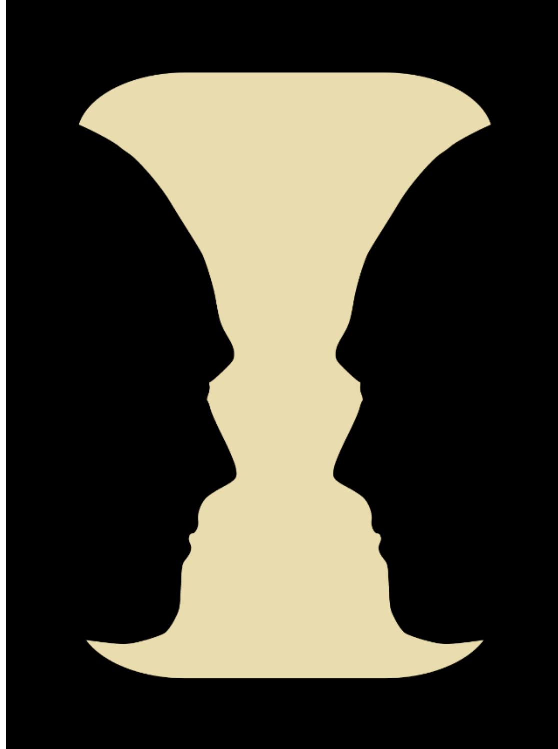

Figure 1: Rubin's Vase (1915).

That we glimpse symbolic meaning—of two faces constituting the contours of a chalice, or "hope" as a "thing with feathers" (Dickinson, 1891)—is the poet's goal. Mark Doty (2010) writes of the need for the poet to be "a supreme handler of the figurative speech we all use every day, employing language's tendency to connect like and disparate things to the richest possible effects" (p. 75). The spontaneous and undoubtable sense that Rubin's Vase is more than a chalice, more than two profiles, and more than the sum of its parts as an optical illusion is akin to the effects of the poet's work with language. The language of the poet is connective tissue in surprising ways, abstract and rich in its possible effects. This work of metaphor is not merely hedonistic embellishment. Doty continues:

> In poetry, figuration is at its most sophisticated: condensed, alive with meaning, pointing in multiple directions at once. And it's crucial to notice that simile and metaphor are not simply ornamental devices, like frosting on the cake of sense. Far from being just ways to

> make meaning seem more attractive, figurative speech itself means, and means intensely. It's one of the poet's primary tools for conveying the texture of experience and for inquiring into experience in search of meaning. (Doty, 2010, p. 75)

Metaphors—among other poetic devices like imagery or allegory—are art in an educational milieu that increasingly prizes the empirical sciences. Metaphors mean. In our present discussion of meaning as framed by the reading of a classroom poem, I do not intend promote the kinds of "schooled practices" that position the art of poetry as if it were a specimen of empirical science. I am not suggesting we pinion the work of poetry to regurgitating an immutable "central idea"—to borrow language from the standards[10]—to then fortify with the use of specific evidence so as to render the poem "a specimen for examination under the microscope of interpretive practices" (Pindyck & Vinz, 2020, p. xiiv).

By foregrounding my concern with meaning, I do not attempt to repackage the worst of *formalist* approaches; instead, I aim for that which is often excluded by such interpretive practices—that teacher and student might *experience* something meaning-full, glimpse the symbolic and the whole, and feel meaning's reverberations in their selves and lives. I aim to consider the experience of perceiving meaning—of understanding not *what* a poem means, but *how* it means, that is, how it hangs together.[11] Resisting the all too familiar device scavenger

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[10] See CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2: "Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

[11] The language of caring for *how* a poem means instead of *what* it means is found in John Ciardi's (1959) *How Does a Poem Mean?*, a text central to New Criticism and, by extension, influential to *formalist* approaches to the teaching of poetry. However, upon closer examination, Ciardi does not give us as tight a case as the *formalists* of Dressman and Faust's depiction might. Ciardi writes against "message hunting" with no interest in the poem except for the paraphrasable: "FOR WHAT DOES THE POEM MEAN? is too often a self-destroying approach to poetry. A more useful way of asking the question is HOW DOES THE POEM MEAN? Why does it build itself into a form out of images, ideas, and rhythms? How do these elements become the meaning? How are they inseparable from the meaning?" (pp. 667-668). To underscore the ways in which Ciardi need not be positioned as a figure neatly in the *formalist* camp, I include one more excerpt in which he discusses the experience—not the definition—of a poem as

hunt-esque exercises that treat figurative language as pure ornament, we might pursue instead the possibility for the classroom to concern itself more squarely with meaning. Consequently, the symbolic dimension is what eludes many teenagers when first working with a poem. Esther, describing her approach to teaching poetry, speaks to the features she foregrounds for students, content and "symbolic interpretation:"

> I think once I get them to the idea of content, they can kind of get it. But what eludes them is the structure. It kinda messes them up. And then the second idea that I really focus on is symbolic interpretation. For some reason, if you discuss it in a short story, the students grasp it easily. But then, in poetry, it's over their heads. So I think a lot about how I need a lot more scaffolding for poetry.

Studying the symbolic stretches teacher and student to inquire into the texture of experience and to go after meaning—however many directions it might point. Further, working closely with the symbolic in the classroom serves as a way to imagine and take seriously that which is beyond the measurable. If a tenet of highly literate reading is the ability to tolerate "ambiguity, paradox, and uncertainty" and a "willingness to suspend closure" (Blau, 2003, pp. 19-20) then metaphor, symbol, and by extension, poetry are the teacher's best tools to cultivate such a position. Put another way, poetry's images and devices are "forms that let us inhabit abstraction as if from within, and so begin to know our kinship with the wide field of being. They show the way poetry moves consciousness toward empathy" (Hirshfield, 1997, p. 17). If part of the educational project is to reimagine and renegotiate the world in which students inhabit—to widen fields of being, to cultivate empathy—poetry's symbolic dimensions present an apt site for classroom

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central and concludes, "What greater violence can be done to the poet's experience than to drag it into an early morning classroom and to go after it as an item on its way to a Final Examination? The apology must at least be made" (p. 666).

attention. It follows as well that part of the educational project, even if tacit, is to help students and teachers lead meaningful and fulfilled lives, to see how life's parts hang together to make up something whole.

2.3 Inextricability from Language

"Poetry is language at its most distilled and most powerful."

—Rita Dove (2012)

Poetry is often seen as a highly technical, idiosyncratic form of language. But to accept this is to neglect the way that poetry is embedded within both mundane and early uses of language. One can recall nursery rhymes or other childhood jingles which structured one's entrance into language as easily as one can appreciate the ineffable poetic quality of gifted political orders. To cordon off poetry as a qualitatively unique form of language is to ignore the way poetry makes ordinary language sharp, fresh, and alive. Dove gives us the "most distilled and most powerful." Doty similarly describes the near-transcendent beauty and resonance "when words are tuned to their highest ability, deployed with the strengths the most accomplished poets bring to bear on the project of saying what's before us" (2010, p. 10). Matthew Zapruder further: "In poetry our familiar language can start to feel resonant with significance, more alive, even noble again. The words we use in our everyday lives always carry along with them deep reservoirs of history (personal and collective) that can, through a poem, be activated" (2017, p. 164). These are but three descriptions of the art of description. In each of them, though, lies language—the bedrock of poetry, its stuff. Poetry showcases and harnesses the power of language, left for the reader to experience. Poetry gives language to "what's before us" and names our world. Poetry revitalizes our familiar, too often unconscious language. Poetry asks us

to look closely at words and how they mean. Each of these dimensions has the capacity to enliven and nourish teacher and student alike.

Further, the inextricable relationship between language and poetry might help us in our quest to develop new relationships to language and to find language more sufficient as a tool for connecting across difference. In an era of nameless, faceless vitriolic comment sections and illegibility in bifurcated, siloed political discourse, there seems little time for language's art and full connective capacities. Developing a new relationship to language might involve trying to care about and mean what we say. Or, to think that words matter. Zapruder (2017), in a larger conversation about language and poetry and in reference to the language of the public square's euphemistic tendency to strip language from its content, writes, "We don't need a purification of our language, but a reawakening to what we are really saying" (p. 126). I am not arguing for poetry as a silver bullet fix to the ills that plague our public discourse. I do, however, wonder about the specific potential poetry carries to attune its readers to how and *that* words mean. Esther speaks to the way poetry forces her and her students to work at the word level of language: "So it's a lot more like, 'Hey, what does this word mean?' rather than 'What does this sentence or paragraph mean?' They have less to work with and it's about getting them to focus." Contemplating how a poet wields the power of a single word to make meaning cultivates familiarity and proficiency with the inherent multiplicity of word meanings that make up our language and, often, unconscious use.

That poetry might revitalize or point us toward new ways of relating to language circles the notion that poetry *is* language. French philosopher Alain Badiou writes, "the poem is language itself" and "the poem is thus language grasped in its intimate cadence; language come into its own under the law of its scansion, or its breathing" (Badiou, 1993/2014, p. 26). Natural

as language itself, poetry need not exclude any reader. And if poetry, “the pressed oil of words” (Hirshfield, 1997, p. 32), embodies an associative, metaphorical, imagistic mode that apprentices its readers toward seeing gestalts—wholes made up of and more than their parts—it follows that such features of language are natural, too, and not some fanciful, elitist exercise.

If poetry is language itself, then claims of poetry’s inaccessibility suggest not a condemnation of the form entirely but an untoward representation of the form. Like a student who replies, incredulous, “Well, *who* are you listening to?” to my (facetious) proclamation that I hate music, that it just is not for me, so too might we champion poetry’s bountiful range. If poetry is language itself, then its resources are nearly inexhaustible, and it seems malleably suited to classroom integration in a way that makes sense for the particular collection of teachers and students. This does not mean each poem read in a given classroom will resonate with every student and teacher every time. Esther makes this apparent to her students, striving for increased accessibility: “So then I told them, I hope after this unit, you can come away with at least one lesson being like, you know what? I liked this. [...] I want each kid to feel like poetry is accessible.” A minute later, Esther related the moment from her class where this reasoning resonated with a student: “One kid actually said that today, she was like, you know, I think the beauty of poetry is that it has so many different mediums and arts and styles. If you don’t like one, it doesn’t mean you hate all poetry, it just means that that one didn’t stick with you. And I was like, ‘Great, we’re done!’” Poetry, like language, is ripe for multiplicity and accessibility. The variety of poetic forms and subjects means that poetry in the classroom offers a number of on ramps for students to access what is often (wrongly) considered impermeable. While these lines from Esther could easily serve as the preamble to an argument for increased poetry exposure—a laudable argument—I bring this example to the fore to highlight the possible

reframing when poetry in the classroom is understood as language, as natural and as manifold in its variety.

What I am also working to articulate here is that meaning-making with language is natural too. This might feel obvious, as language is the human means for the communication of meaning, but it bears closer attention. With the pedagogical emphasis on accessibility and the hopes to nurture positive poetry experiences, the first poem Esther gives her students is Billy Collins' (1988, p. 58)—oft-cited in poetry teacher circles—"Introduction to Poetry."[12] Maeve, too, mentioned the poem as a potential first to give to her students:

Introduction to Poetry

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

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[12] Billy Collins, "Introduction to Poetry" from The Apple That Astonished Paris. Copyright © 1988, 1996 by Billy Collins. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, LLC, on behalf of the University of Arkansas Press, www.uapress.com.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

Of her students, Esther says, "They love [Collins' poem] because they're like, this is how I feel! And I say, 'Yeah, that reaction you're getting? You're reading poetry.'" The felt sense, the experiential resonance of knowing how waterskiing across a poem's surface is different than "beating it with a hose / to find out what it really means," does not need further explication. The figurative, associative moves here do not obscure language but enliven it, do not render language inaccessible but freshly legible. The spontaneous "aha" click of meaning happens. With the poem as unimpeded and striking as language itself, the student feels how the poem works—the gestalt comprehension is there, the whole understood, and the parts all the more interesting for their orchestration.

2.4 Cultivation of Attention

Instructions for living a life:
Pay attention.
Be astonished.

Tell about it.

—Mary Oliver (2009a, p. 37)

Attention is the currency of our age—monetized by our devices, harder to sustain. Attention is what teachers, all day, try to attain from their students: bell ringers, exit tickets, timers on the board, "1, 2, 3, eyes on me!" Oliver's words have given many an English teacher language for her goals—myself among them. I have offered this pithy excerpt from "Sometimes" (Oliver, 2009a) to countless students, hoping to underscore attention's importance and vitality. I would point to Oliver and to Simone Weil—"attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity" (Zaretsky, 2021, p.54)—in an effort to name the life-affirming beckoning poetry does. It asks us to take notice and, when we do, gifts us with richer experience. I can hear my voice rising now, telling my high school students it is always cooler to be the kind of person who feels astonished, cooler to care, and to invite others into the wonder of noticing. Oliver's haiku-esque "instructions for living a life" was and is the throughline I needed to answer the ever-present "when are we ever going to use this?" question. Poetry is not about use, it teaches us about how to live a life; as such, we yield nothing of substance if we come at poetry/life (both!) with our eyes closed.

I would be remiss to claim this idea as original. Many have described poetry and attention's tether. Writer and theologian Frederick Buechner (2017) writes, "Literature, before it is saying anything else, is saying, be mindful. Stop whatever else you're doing and notice. Allow yourself to be seized by this." Attention's virtues encapsulate the writing as well as the reading. Doty characterizes the work of description, of composing a poem, as the work of vision: "It's not just looking at things that reveals the self, but vigilant, careful, seeing" (2014, p. 45). Here I am reminded again of gestalt comprehension—that to see something anew is to experience meaning.

Zwicky (2020) writes that great poems, like great mathematical theorems, offer lyric insights that "present a whole in a manner that invites us to see parts we'd never noticed before and to see them in connection with parts we thought we knew, but now see differently. They change the way we view things. We become aware of something very like an ecosystem" (2020, p. 5). Attending to the poem offers the potential to attend to that which is much bigger than the poem.

Teachers similarly need little explanation about the importance of attention or the link between attention and poetry. It is *in* the work—of teaching and of working with students and literature. Yet, the quality of attention the poem prompts is kaleidoscopic and something *more than* what might first come to mind. Maya Pindyck and Ruth Vinz stress attention's role in their book, *A Poetry Pedagogy for Teachers: Reorienting Classroom Literacy Practices,* wherein they discuss "creating a repertoire of strategies for ourselves and our students to slow down and linger in poems and focusing on notices, questions, and points of attention" as the "primary first steps in facilitating reading practices with poetry" (Pindyck et al., 2022, p. xv). This special *attention* to the way reading practices might shift and shape how we notice is what they describe as "cultivating the geometries of attention," which serves as the premise of their pedagogical position (Pindyck et al., 2022, p. 2). Poems are that which can shift and shape the vectors of our attention, and, if we take up attention as the principle task of the poem, we better notice how a poem prompts us to attend to spatial elements, temporal movement, and the movement of our own gaze. Vinz and Pindyck draw on Wallace Stevens' poem of perceptual shifts, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (1954), as the rachis of their pedagogical approach; each of the thirteen chapters explores a different way of attending to poetry in the aim of reorienting and expanding poetry's capacities in our pedagogical purview. Attending this way is natural to poems but not natural to our schooling practices which prematurely truncate the reading process

through an obsession with pinning down what a poem “means.” Slowing down, lingering, exploring our noticings, allowing the poem to provoke, and focusing the where of our attention might seem luxurious or gruesome, given the dearth of such time available to the contemporary teacher. Esther comments on the irony of poetry’s condensed and, therefore, deceptively short form coupled with the kind of robust attention writing it requires:

> You need to have the space and the time to sit with [poetry] awhile [...] it’s ironic because it’s so short. But because it’s so short, you have to be really intentional about almost every word—the way that it’s formatted, the syntax. And that’s what makes it more difficult because you have to pay such close attention. And I think sometimes we don’t require that as often, it’s a hard thing. It can be exhausting to always pay such close attention to detail.

Esther’s honesty here strikes me, that this kind of deliberate attention is seldom required in school and rarely called for in contemporary forms of life. When the work of the classroom demands this attention, it exhausts and proves a heavy burden to teacher and student alike. We might be left to ask, though, whether this muscle need be left to atrophy or be vigorously exercised. In addition to the skills of suspending closure and sitting with ambiguity and paradox, Blau (2003) also includes the “capacity for sustained focused attention” as another of the highly literate reader’s foremost qualities, underscoring how often failures of comprehension are best recast as failures in attention (p. 19). That attention proves rare, taxing, and a crucial harbinger for sophisticated, critical literacy skill seems all the more reason to consider both what its directed toward and how to best nurture its strength. Do we cultivate the kind of classroom wherein students—and teachers—grow in their capacities to perform the sort of deliberate, attentive act that it is to be with a poem and, thus, to reap its rewards?

In reflecting on her daily poetry practice of opening her high school ELA class period with a poem, Maeve speaks of attention in a different sense: "I do think it's a very calming way to begin class that allows [students] to be a little bit meditative. I have never had to talk over anyone during it, which I always notice." Poetry does not just demand careful—sometimes scrupulous—attention, it also welcomes it. Offering a kind of meditative reading experience, one that quiets with no need for appeals to external authority, poetry elicits a kind of respect in Maeve's class that other mediums have not. "Pay attention," poetry says (Oliver, 2009a, p. 37). This kind of "meditative" attention does not seem the kind where the brain empties itself of all thoughts but that which focuses. Hirshfield describes this state as one of concentration and concentration as a "particular state of awareness: penetrating, unified, and focused, yet also permeable and open. [...] The experience of concentration may be quietly physical—a simple, unexpected sense of deep accord between yourself and everything" (1997, p. 3). The language of a state in which experience is unified, unexpected, and yields a "sense of deep accord between yourself and everything" is the language of gestalt where the act of perceiving things in their melodic wholeness—re-seeing—brings pleasure and congruence. Hirshfield continues, "In the whole-heartedness of concentration, world and self begin to cohere. With that state comes an enlarging: of what may be known, what may be felt, what may be done" (1997, p. 4). This whole-hearted concentration, coherence between self and world, and sense of enlargement might describe the substance of the attentiveness Maeve hardly need prompt at the start of her class; maybe all of this is what the poem invites for its reader (teacher and student alike), especially the communal reader. I am taking note of the possibility poetry has to enlarge its readers into a sense of sync with the world and alignment with those we read with—what a way to start class!

Whether the attention quiets, concentrates, or demands scrupulosity, the kind of attention poetry evokes requires a slowing down. Poetry requires breath, space between words, expansion, and deliberation. “You can’t skim poetry,” Esther tells me, describing how poetry can tax its reader. The readerly attention necessary to attend to poetry’s subtleties, symbolic nature, and careful wielding of language is far from the kinds of readerly attention we so often nurture in school—scan for keywords, read the title headings and questions at the back of the packet first, look at the pictures. Once, in high school, a teacher encouraged me to “skim the words around the margins of the text to try to piece together tone and content based on the headings.” Needless to say, I do not remember what I read that way (nor would I venture I understood it or took it seriously). I do remember A. E. Stallings’ (2010) “But it isn’t the unfathomable fall / That makes me giddy, makes my stomach lurch, / It’s that the ledge itself invents the leap” and Langston Hughes’ (1922/2001, p. 154) “Hold fast to dreams / For when dreams go / Life is a barren field / Frozen with snow.” My lasting memory of these poems attests to slow, deliberate time spent. Or more likely, such memory attests to the decisions of my teachers to prioritize the slow, deliberate work of memorization. Giving poetry the kind of attention required to read it well cultivates a way of attending—to words and how they come to mean—in a sticky, slow reverence that counters the way our technology, public square, and contemporary schooling typically cultivate our attention.

2.5 The Internal Goods of Poetry

> “Cleaving close to the ground rules by which all language is made, good poetry carries broad information within brief speech. Image in particular, by gathering many energies toward a single end, creates an intense compression of meaning.”
>
> —Hirshfield (1997, p. 114)

Reflecting on these four dimensions of poetry—its length, symbolic logic, inextricability from language, and ability to cultivate an attentive, present mind—allows one to see the practicalities of centering poetry in the classroom as a means by which teachers can foster a rich literary culture that exposes students to a high volume of text without the perils of constant analysis. In trying to delineate these four dimensions, I note the way they often overlap and entwine. What I have attempted to work out here is what poetry, as a specific genre of literature, has within it that is useful and vital for the teacher to contemplate. Moreover, poetry is more than a specific genre of literature we "check off" on the syllabus but an experience. Poetry is not just a description of a poetic state of mind that the teacher/student/reader observes but the experience of a poetic state of mind itself. In other words, I am trying to figure what, to use the language of practice theory, the "goods internal" (MacIntyre, 2013, p. 187) to poetry—specifically, poetry as an experience—might be for the classroom.

When I think about the goods internal to poetry in the classroom, the word "meaning" comes to mind as a primary reason for why teachers might bother with the neglected form. I return to Jan Zwicky and the notion of gestalt comprehension. Zwicky assuages our fears over Artificial Intelligence and articulates the embodied, human feature of making meaning:

> Meaning isn't structured in a way that will allow it to be made by a machine; there is no series of steps that can assure insight into the nature of the world. The process cannot be digitized. It is not programmable. This is because the perception of gestalts does not, by definition, occur in piecemeal, stepwise fashion: gestalts are wholes and perception of them occurs all at once and also as a whole. (Zwicky, 2020, p. 18)

That the structure of meaning has to do with insight, seeing things whole, and the nature of the world and not to do with that which can be compartmentalized, explained, or colonized provokes

me to consider what *is* (content) worth teaching and in what *ways* (how). If so much knowledge can be programmable and outsourced—something which we in education bemoan with increasing regularity—then a shift to learning how to perceive gestalts becomes more than a luxurious, pet educational priority. Learning *how* to perceive gestalts, to experience meaning in ways that are impossible to delegate to Siri or ChatGPT, resonates with the goods extant in the experience of poetry and is work well-suited for the teacher of poetry and her classroom community.

Caesura 2

It's About Attention?

for the class of 2018

I ask them what a poem is

And they tell me a story about modern art

It looks like nothing, you see, until the

Velvet stanchion ropes in a perfect braid

And gilded ornament curves its corners

I want to say, the poem is not nothing

They're being obstinate, postmodern

It's like that block of Swiss cheese with hair in it!

Stylize some trash and put it in a case!

They're spirited now, this post-lunch crowd

Seniors, despite themselves, debating the

Boundaries of the form, their voices

Weaving to a dense purply silk

And I see the chalice for the face

So, you're saying—

Interlude

Our discussion so far has described some of the how and why of teaching poetry—an endeavor that could continue for the rest of these pages with greater breadth and increased specificity. Yet, just as the "how" framed in the *formalist-populist* heuristic felt unsatisfactory when it came to thinking about "why" we teach it, the previous chapter's descriptions of the nature of poetry and its value in the classroom also leave us wanting. It seems that, in some cases, the poetry teacher aims for her students to delight in poetry's specific goods, and in other cases, the task pertains more to developing a certain acquaintance with poetry. This is a range we will consider more closely in the coming chapters. All to say, there is another layer of goods untouched. Neither of these previous categories—crudely, the "how" and "why" we teach poetry—ask the question about what teaching poetry does to the one teaching it. Though both former categories are worthwhile to consider, it seems we obscure something vital when these things solely hold our focus.

In the remaining chapters, I turn to theories of practice to think more closely about the reflexivity of what teachers do and who we become, teaching as a practice that forms its practitioners, and poetry's role in that formation for the English teacher. While this interlude also signals a shift to a more theoretical register, I make efforts to ground abstractions in examples—both real and imagined. It is my hope that in prioritizing the teacher, without neglecting all that has come before, I can meditate on something that has felt largely ineffable but true: that a life spent teaching English, reading and writing with young people day after day, is a good way to spend a life and that poetry serves as a special kind of distillation for considering the goods this life entails.

Chapter 3: Practice

Jan Zwicky's concern with the experience of meaning is decidedly practical. She emphasizes method, pointing to *how* learning—here, learning how to make meaning and see gestalts—takes place through slow, relational vectors of teaching and practice:

> Although the recipes are not available, the question *How do we become proficient in gestalt comprehension*? nonetheless has a clear answer: practice. [...] It is just the answer Aristotle gave his fellow citizens about how to become virtuous, and he expected to be understood. Aristotle expanded a little: he suggested that we hang out with those known for excellence. Acquire some experience of how they go about their lives. Follow in their footsteps. Copy them. It's the same advice you'd give to someone in fifteenth-century Florence who wanted to become a painter, or to someone in an eighteenth-century Haida village who wanted to learn how to carve. That is: becoming proficient in gestalt comprehension, like learning to be virtuous, learning to paint, learning to carve, is an *art*. There's no civilization in the world, except perhaps our own, that does not understand a great deal of what learning *is* in these terms. (Zwicky, 2020, p. 18, emphasis original)

A clear answer—practice, learning, becoming. For all of the sometimes buoyant, ethereal talk we give to poetry, the simplicity of practice seems, well, *practical.* Thinking Zwicky's example through, it would follow that a student, interested in becoming proficient in gestalt comprehension—in the experience of meaning—would "hang out with those known for excellence" in such kinds of comprehension, i.e. the teacher, and "acquire some experience of how they go about their lives." The student would study the teacher, not just the content they present and work with. It would also follow that a teacher, interested in becoming proficient in gestalt comprehension for the purposes of their teaching, would "hang out with those known for

excellence" in the experience of meaning. Those known for excellence in this way might be other teachers, professors, poets, writers, and so on. They would copy the exemplar's ways of being, as the presumed expert in gestalt comprehension. Such an effort is not always rigidly social, either. The teacher might enact this quality of "hanging around" by spending deep time with the material left by exemplary practitioners. The teacher reads poems, reads books about poets and poetry, listens to podcasts, and otherwise immerses themselves in the practice of poetry. The teacher engages in the long history of poetry, a practice that holds its own internal goods that teachers seek to realize. They might attempt to copy the poet's ways of being or ways of finding meaning. Much like apprentices or understudies, the student and teacher both have their ways of practicing towards their goals. Like painting or carving, practice in gestalt comprehension indicates a *doing* and that doing takes a certain direction.

A word on doing. The colloquial syntax construction, "this semester we're doing *Macbeth*" used to amuse me. Though I would never venture the comment, I knew we were not *doing* this or any book, really in any sense of *doing's* possible definitions. This way of phrasing it is just something we English teachers say as we move quickly through a conversation about curriculum, planning, or sequencing. We're doing *Macbeth*. What we mean is that we are reading it—as a class, in a community, maybe at home for homework, sometimes closely and slowly, sometimes aloud and boisterous, sometimes exaggerating the iambs, sometimes repeating the musicality until the pages sing. We are discussing the text, considering its themes, writing about and responding to it, reading secondary literature, and researching its context. We are teaching it. We are also "learning" it, "living" it, "being in and with it." All of this description is bigger than reading and sounds like a lot of doing—verbs and verbs of what we do *with* the text. The use of the word "doing" captures the whole that is more than its parts, making

an effort to articulate more about what actually happens in the classroom than that which is fully identifiable, transparent, and on the surface.

So much of what makes up the English Language Arts classroom is the doing—namely, reading, writing, discussing, and the strategies wherein we try to learn to do each of these tasks better or with increased confidence, subtlety, competence, and thoughtfulness. Teachers and students alike try to grow in our excellence as understood by the discipline of English Language Arts, practicing the *art*. These doings happen with incredible variety, dependent on a host of factors in and outside of the classroom. Discourse abounds on how teachers and students *do* the work of the ELA classroom—activities or procedures considered effective by the field, a given school district, or a particular department. Here, however, I want to attend to the specific, lived experience of poetry as practice within the ELA classroom. How does it look and feel to read poetry in a high school English classroom—for the teacher and for the student? I pursue how an eye to practice, and later ritual, drawing on practice theory, might help make sense or make a new kind of sense of the classroom space.

3.1 Practice Theory

In the late twentieth century as a way around the impasse of collectivist structural and individualist behavioral conceptions of social life, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu sketched a theoretical grounding for understanding human life as a set of interdependent practices. Rejecting the rigidity of structuralism or a vulgar behavioralism, Bourdieu's practical conceptualization planted the seeds of practice theory today. Simply, practice theory considers doing, the practices people engage in, as the primary lens with which to make sense of human life—both socially and individually. In this view, which takes the limitations of overly individual or collective interpretive frameworks as its starting point, the examination of sets of practices is

an inherently social inquiry. Though no unified theory of practice exists, a view highlighting practices affords a way of understanding that captures interconnectedness, the vitality of activity in social life, and the co-constitutive property of the culture humans create and sustain together:

> The appeal of what has been variably described as practice idiom, practice standpoint, practice lens, and a practice-based approach lies in its capacity to describe important features of the world we inhabit as something that is routinely made and re-made in practice using tools, discourse, and our bodies. From this perspective the social world appears as a vast array or assemblage of performances made durable by being inscribed in human bodies and minds, objects and texts, and knotted together in such a way that the results of one performance become the resource for another. (Nicolini, 2012, p. 2)

What Davide Nicolini highlights here is the way in which a practice view involves considerations of the fluid, embodied, and material features of human life as well as the ways practices are simultaneously inherited by individuals from their community and, in turn, shaped by these same individuals. Practices are at once received and made. A practice-based approach attempts to consider the environment, the larger structure or organization in which practices are situated, as the "site and result" (p. 2) of activity. As such, considering practices offers a helpful key to making sense of a kaleidoscopic and dizzyingly complex social world. Any ostensibly single action is revealed as constructed of many prior and co-temporal practices in concert to create and sustain the world we inhabit and the way that world sets the limits for what is possible for those inside of it, marking the boundaries of the intelligible, the practical, and the actual.

Theodore Schatzki (2002) has highlighted the ways in which these horizons of experience—both practical and conceptual parameters—determine the way that "people do what makes sense for them to do" (p. 232). This is a premise Schatzki owes to an engagement with the

phenomenological tradition stretching back to Martin Heidegger and an understanding of "social practices as the fundamental phenomenon in social life" (p. xi) grounded in Ludwig Wittgenstein's conception of forms of life. Schatzki's insights suggest not only that conceptions of what is practical (i.e. what makes sense) are variable according to socio-cultural or historical habituation, but also that these forms of life are conceptually penetrable. In other words, we can *understand* the inter- and intra-connectedness of social groups and persons through keen attention to the practices in which those groups and persons engage. This *practical* attention is an attempt to leave "behind the either/or of totality or individuality" as binary master concepts (p. 11). Contemporary practice theorists remain frustrated with social ontologies unable to escape this binary and thus seek a new starting point in practices (p. 9).

I return to the definition of practice offered by moral and political philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, who also articulates the social character of practice as key in both the origin and execution of practice. I find MacIntyre's definition particularly helpful for our consideration of practices in the social space of a classroom—especially if, as they do here, those practices involve teaching and poetry. Differing from Bourdieu, Schatzki, and Nicolini, MacIntyre defines practice as

> Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (2013, p. 187)

The notion of goods internal to practices prompts a host of questions for our inquiry—what are the goods internal to the practice of teaching?[13] Of poetry?[14] Of teaching English? Of ritual? What are the specific goods internal to those practices and how do they differ from contemporary schooling practices i.e. standardized test prep? What if our classrooms conceived of "the ends and goods involved," not *just* ends themselves—the achieved learning target, the evaluation score, the grade point average? When the teacher participates in the practice of poetry by reading poems, engaging literature about poets and poetry, and consuming poetry-related media, the "ends and goods involved" are not simply those that have to do with what they will say to their students about poetry. The teacher is also engaging in the goods internal to poetry itself, attending to those goods and how she might both experience them personally and encourage her students to grow into the cultivation and appreciation of these goods. Further, her doing so affords her greater excellence in the practice. To be concerned with something beyond an instrumental outcome in a practice is to also see how the language of internal goods does not indicate a "distant point on the horizon but the journeys toward the good" (Higgins, 2011, p. 56). When we think about practice, we think about the *doing*—or the "journey toward"—and not just what a given practice produces. The teacher's poetry research, even if first taken up as a means to a lesson-planning end, sets her on a journey toward engaging poetry as a practice, an odyssey on which she can, hopefully, bring her students along.

I want to note a distinction here between MacIntyre's definition and those of Schatzki and Nicolini. Though I will attend to this further in the coming sections, I want to note my interest in practice as that which is concerned with (1) understanding human social life and

[13] Though MacIntyre does not categorize teaching under his definition of practice, I will attend to this debate by drawing on the work of Chris Higgins' *The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice* (2011) in chapter five to consider teaching as a practice itself and teaching poetry as another.
[14] I attempted an abbreviated answer for this, attempting to limn the goods internal to poetry in Chapter 2.

activity as well as (2) a way of conceiving of the agency and goods inside a more conspicuously delineated and disciplinary sense of practice. For our cases, the latter pertains to the school, the discipline of poetry, or poetry teaching most specifically. The use of the word "practice" helps us describe the way a classroom is made and remade by its participants—setting the horizons of what its members conceive of as what makes sense for them to do—and helps to make conscious the way collective seeking of the goods of practice and deliberate "hanging around" might become more a part of the classroom ecosystem. Practice gives us a rich theoretical framework to explicate all that is going on and all that is possible in the poetry classroom.

I do not pretend to offer a robust philosophical defense of practices as the *most* "fundamental phenomenon of social life" (Schatzki, 2002, p. xi) for such is beyond the scope of this inquiry. Rather, by launching from a presumption of the importance of practices, and the notion that practices carry with them internal goods that are worthy of contemplation and achievement in and of themselves, I hope to avoid the ways that scholarship on education often falls into the binary of a hyper-focus on either individual experience or totalizing, structural assessment—most obvious in first-person analyses and impersonal data sets of test scores or rankings, respectively. Following Schatzki's work for a new starting point, I foreground the inseparability of the individual and her social context, simultaneously refusing the ontological primacy of the individual or the collective. A view to practices can avoid the myopic individualism of behavioral analysis and the determinism of a rigid structuralism. This eschewal of the individual-collective binary means that an eye to practices can help make sense of students and teachers as simultaneously plotted within a system beyond their control and yet agential persons with available choices within these systems. The practice view, then, avoids the problems of reducing teachers and students to data points entirely constrained by forces outside

of their influence as well as the danger of a view which sees them as the sole masters of their fate.

By refusing to privilege the individual or the collective in favor of the other, this view allows for greater clarity of "the social constitution of the individual" (Schatzki, 2002, p. 10) and understands identity as a porous construct, tethered to an overlapping network of internal and external dimensions. Discussing Chantal Moufee's work on subject positions, Schatzki writes of identity:

> Identity in the sense of I-ness is not an inherent property of a thing or substance called the subject. It is instead a social construction, an achievement realized only through the incorporation of human beings into the institutions and structures of social life. This holds true, however, not only of this now traditional modern notion of identity, being an I, but also of the more recent and more content-full notion of being a particular someone. (p. 7)

Subject positions, in Moufee's conception, help people render themselves composite, incorporated into the institutions and structures of their quotidian lives. As such, notions of identity—mother, dancer, citizen, ornithologist, Armenian, basketball player, extrovert—are not fixed but rather precariously "made available to people by the practices in which they participate" (pp. 7-8). These subject positions also overlap. A student might be a "math person" and also a lover of poetry. A teacher might also be a poet. Focusing on the individual as a hypostatized subject flattens out the ways in which practices form a complicated nexus of identity.

Schatzki utilizes the German word *Zusammenhang*, meaning "a state of held-togetherness," to suggest the way individuals and practices relate within a webbed nexus-context

and how practices guide, direct, empower, and embody the relationalities of roles in the doing. Aiming to locate an intra-related midpoint from which to consider the individual and the social together, *Zusammenhang* helps to articulate how "human coexistence is a hanging-together of human lives that forms a context in which each proceeds individually. This formulation is designed to accommodate states of sociality of varying breadths and complexity" in both micro-situations and macrophenomena (p. 14). Again, the language of hanging together works to articulate a meaningful gestalt. The human exists in a porous, webbed, co-constitutive context. The teacher, though they might be perceived as an individual, proceeds out of and is more than her formative, coexisting, and layered bricolage of contexts: the contexts of her own classroom, previous schooling experiences with teachers and poetry, friendships, community of colleagues, broader school and district communities, neighborhood and national residence, and other dimensions of her poetry experiences. So too the student. Each student, perceived as an individual but never fully *individual*, is thus formed by the practices of their shared nexus-context—for instance, the classroom—before they return again to their extended and multivariate other nexus-contexts. As Louise Rosenblatt reminds us, the student "comes to the book from life" and will resume it afterward (1976/1933, p. 35). The classroom and, more microcosmically, the reading experience present spaces ripe for considering the ways in which shared social practices form those extant in "a state of held-togetherness" and their interrelationality. If lives hang together in relationship through practice, "practices are the medium in which lives interrelate" (p. 14), and practices house specific internal goods, then the practice view grants the researcher the privileged position of looking at sociality as an interrelated, synergistic dimension and at questions of value.

For example, we might observe how Maeve's classroom practice and, in particular, her practices with poetry emerge out of an entangled nexus of past and present experiences. In her junior year as a high school student, her English teacher read a poem to start class each day. This is a rhythm she decidedly took up when she began her own teaching practice, bringing it to her student teaching placement. She speaks about it as a first autonomous step: "So that was the first time a classroom became my own—getting to share a poem of the day. That was one ritual that was mine, that I came in with and got to establish, even though it was borrowed from someone else." Reaching back into her past as a student, Maeve verbalizes a throughline and finds her life interrelated with that of her former teacher, her cooperating teacher, and her current students through this practice. Here we see one illumination of the held-togetherness of our classroom practices. Or, in Nicolini's (2012) words, "the result of one performance become[s] the resource for another" (p. 2). The world we inhabit is routinely made and re-made, our practices continually taking shape; as such, the absence, as well as the presence, of a dimension of practice indicates the imprint of sociality. Somewhere in her first few years of teaching, Maeve dropped the ritual of reading a daily poem. When I asked her about this choice, she replied,

> So I really did love it, and I think it went well when I did it. I think I succumbed to the pressure of making use of every minute. I don't know. I'm really excited to get back into it. I'm not the same teacher I was that first year. And so I think it could look different. But, yeah, that's not my proudest answer.

Though not a direct tie like her first answer, Maeve still makes these decisions—these evaluations of value—inside of a school system wherein she feels the need to maximize efficiency and wherein she was the only person in her English department engaging in reading a

daily poem. These pedagogical decisions move out of a *Zusammenhang,* proceeding individually yet not independent of a shared, co-constitutive context.

If "people do what makes sense for them to do" (Schatzki, 2002, p. 232), then the histories and environments of our experiences give shape to that sense. Maeve's decisions regarding whether or not to include a daily poem as part of her teaching practice each made a different sort of sense for her when she made them. In this example, I see the hanging together of the social and the individual. But as we "come to the book from life" (Rosenblatt, 1976/1933, p. 35), life outside the school equally shapes the teacher's horizon of intelligibility, of what makes sense for them to do. Frank recalls his "late to the game" love for poetry, attributing it to a discarded Mary Oliver book he picked up on "somebody's stoop" in college wherein "I really just fell in love with the beauty, the natural images that she writes, and sort of—not the simplicity—but the real accessibility which I think Neruda really talks about." A few sentences later, Frank speaks to this feeling of casual discovery and surprise as characteristic of his pedagogical practice,

> That was just lucky for me. I didn't think [the Mary Oliver collection] would resonate with me that much. But realizing that first, you don't know what's going to connect with some students. You don't know everything about a student. You don't know what's really going to intrinsically speak to them inside but also, just knowing your students is the biggest thing. When I'm thinking about poetry, I ask myself, what would they really, you know, vibe with? Or what are they thinking about nowadays? How could the poetry we bring in touch on that? And so they can use their outside knowledge, their knowledge that they bring into school and really feel like they can make this poetry their own.

The correlation between Frank's life and his classroom practices exemplifies the way that what teachers *do* in the classroom comes out of a conception of the goods involved, in this case, that poetry might resonate with student concerns, engage their funds of knowledge, connect with them on a personal level, and surprise them. Further, Frank's movement from discussing the Mary Oliver book on the stoop to the kind of tone he works to set in his classroom poetry practice allows us to see the movement tracing the goods that make sense to emphasize through practice as those that originate from a certain horizon of intelligibility. An invitation to engage with poetry in the classroom in a manner akin to stumbling upon a poetry book on a stoop is so at odds with typical schooling practices that it shapes and sets apart Frank's pedagogical approach. Here, again, the "result of one performance become[s] the resources for another" (Nicolini, 2012, p. 2) and consciously so. Frank's pedagogical priority of serendipity renders something different intelligible, renders new goods visible, and journeys toward a certain kind of excellence. Though the stoop moment may have been an individual experience for Frank, the presence of the social space of his classroom lends him a new way of seeing this experience via its potential for classroom application. As such, the hanging together nexus-context of life and experience paves the way for the making and remaking of practice.

In short, the practice view can offer a robust and legible rendering of the social space of the classroom through a heightened focus on the practices that form it *as* a discrete social space. Yet because a practice theory framework does not need to reduce agents to purely structural formations, the practice view can observe the ways in which common sense is socially constructed as the product of personal and collective action—practices are both given and made, situated and becoming, historically and culturally bound while still imbued with the continually present possibility for change.

3.2 Habitus

One of the great strengths of the practice view is the way it helps tune one's attention to what Bourdieu called "socialized subjectivity," or more famously, *habitus*. Here, we are not speaking about practices in the MacIntyrian sense of socially established explicit practices like chess or physics. Rather, in the inheritance of forms of life—what Rahel Jaeggi calls "clusters of social practices" (2018, p. 41)—individuals come to take up a pre-reflective, almost instinctual stance towards their world as a byproduct of practice. This happens as practices, determined according to social norms and, thus, with those norms implicitly embedded within them, exert a formative force on the practitioners. This force is felt and effective both normatively and practically. Individuals, always in the making, are subtly and potently shaped according to the practical environments in which they dwell. This shaping gives way to a kind of sixth "sense," a know-how in a given moment of action, which Bourdieu terms *habitus*.

The various concentric circle-esque descriptions of *habitus* stress it as a kind of disposition that enables one to move with acumen within those social practices in which one participates. Rather than a fixed manual for action, *habitus* is simultaneously a set of "durable, transposable dispositions" and a fluid, "strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations" (Bourdieu, 1972, p. 72). Nicolini (2012) defines it as "first and foremost a form of knowing in practice akin to the 'feel for the game' experienced in sport" (p. 55). Here, like an athlete with years of practice under their belt who automatically responds to a situation without reflection, *habitus* "designates a way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body) and, in particular, a predisposition, tendency, propensity, or inclination" (Bourdieu, 1972, p. 214). In MacIntyre's schematic, the athlete's automatic response is evidence of realizing a standard of excellence appropriate to the activity at hand. These dispositions are

both the result of practices, their product, as well as the sustainer and director of practices, their producer.

It would be a mistake to reduce our understanding of *habitus* to habit; it is more flexible and comprehensive than merely repetitive behavior. *Habitus* as a disposition is not an unambiguous script of action. It is not a routine or merely a causally activated response in which persons find themselves pulled via the inertia of practices. Such a view would fall to the deterministic monism of a crude structuralism. Bourdieu warns against treating "practice as a mechanical reaction, directly determined by the antecedent conditions and entirely reducible to the mechanical functioning of preestablished assemblies" (Bourdieu, 1972, p. 73). *Habitus*, rather, is a textured and flexible concept that upholds both the practical formation of a given collective or beings-in-relationality *and* the spontaneity, or freedom, of groups and persons. Even athletes with years of the same training have different responses to identical circumstances, and the same athlete might not respond the exact same way in a repeatable circumstance. Same with teacher and student. Experienced, felt, and embodied in selves, practices tune one to a general stance within a given arrangement of "social fields" (Bourdieu, 1969). A stance allows one to respond to various experiences within the range of possibilities of the fields in which one moves. After reading a poem, the teacher might sense the room needs to sit in silence for a moment. A student might sense that the poem needs to be read and heard again, this time with a different reader. Even if the lesson plans technically indicate that each class period is reading the same text on a given day, the teacher and students might engage in similar practical formations particular to the English classroom and/or school more generally—reading, writing, discussing—yet in free and spontaneous ways that reflect the particular dynamic of those in the room. Habiti

are thus restricted by the practical fields of a situated person or group, limited to a sliver of the possible ways of being in the world.[15]

While the tuning restricts, it also is the means by which people act in the world and come to share in community. By participating in social practices, individuals tune in to one another and come to develop similar know-how for operating within their field of practice successfully or, in other words, for achieving the appropriate standards of excellence. We might think of an elementary school teacher whose students have capacious vocabularies, their language use soaring above those of their peers. Or a school's winning cross-country team in an otherwise below-average athletics department. In these examples, the participants—and, likely, foremost the teacher/coach—bought into a way of practicing. Such a way of practicing also exists inside of and in dialogue with the *habitus* of the broader school. We might imagine a certain love for language infusing classroom vocabulary practices with a sense of empowerment and purpose or a certain force of will that transforms running drills into a means of personal formation. These are merely examples, but I aim to demonstrate the potential for a *way* of practicing to bear formative influence on collective habiti. Further, I hope to likewise demonstrate that such potential formation might stand apart from a *habitus* or several habiti animating the rest of the school and angling them towards less fruitful results. Again, this need not fall into determinism. While the sense of supple know-how is *common* by way of the shared practices, it is also agentially participated in by all involved.

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[15] Readers should note the danger of forgetting that these practical fields are highly limited and partial. Taking one's own practical context as *the* context for being not only forecloses possibilities of practical development and generation but also risks a paternalistic posture towards other fields of practice. The forgetting of such possible ways of being in the world might lead to what Sylvia Wynter (2003) calls the "coloniality of being." See Wynter's discussion of overrepresentation in "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, its Overrepresentation—An Argument."

Drawing on the conceptual richness of *habitus* allows for an understanding of the way different sets of practical environments produce different kinds of subjects and, inversely, how those subjects continue to uphold and develop these practical environments. The world and the classroom are made and remade. Practice theorists understand social life and institutions, like the school, as "ongoing routinized and recurrent accomplishment[s]" made possible by activity, performance, and work (Nicolini, 2012, p. 3). The existence of social structures and institutions we take for granted depends on the activities performed and their related material conditions. Practices, determined intersubjectively, are relationally embedded in our world. Conceptualizing the held-togetherness, that the world is "a seamless assemblage, nexus, or confederation of practices" (p. 3), while also acknowledging the crucial role embodiment and materiality play in social construction, offers the scholar a helpful lens for understanding the synthesis of the individual and the collective as well as structural force and agential power. The school, then, presents a site ripe with opportunities to examine the role of practice in its own construction and conservation. Teachers and administrators regularly consider the relational assemblage of activities and material realities—how to arrange desks to maximize student collaboration, whether or not a moment of silence should be observed, the maintenance of a bell schedule, what colors adorn the walls and hallways, and so on. I further attend to the relationship between institutions like the school and the practice of teaching that happens simultaneously because and in spite of the school further in the final section of Chapter 4. For now, I want to highlight how the taken-for-granted, quotidian nature of such decisions means that participation in them passes unnoticed as natural; while such activities exist as changeable, the community experiences them as all but intrinsic, made explicable by a shared attunement.

3.3 Embodiment, Affect, Agency

Scholarship on practice theory has highlighted the complicated interrelationship between mind and practice. According to Wittgenstein, action, inclusive of practice, is an expression of an internal mental state, albeit an internality distinguished from a metaphysical dualism of various Cartesian and Christian models which understand the internal as an entity in and of itself. By avoiding such a metaphysical conception of internality but upholding the sense of an inner life, we are able to see the ways in which the individual, and thus the mind, is socially constituted yet not exclusive of biological phenomena. Such a focus on social practice yields "deeper insight into the social character of the individual subject" (Schatzki, 1996, p. 20). Summarizing Wittgenstein, Schatzki writes of the view that the individual mind finds *expression* in activity, distinguishing *expression* from a more causal relationship between mind and action. In doing so, the mind/action binary collapses. "Wittgenstein is neither a behaviorist, claiming that mind is nothing but bodily activity, nor a mentalist, maintaining that mind is a distinct and substantial substance or realm" (p. 24). Wittgenstein helps illuminate that there is a kind of entanglement between the individual and the social. The activity of the teacher—her *doings* in the classroom—might then be expressions of practice, social character, and her inner life. The practices expressed might be discipline-specific, perhaps that of the practice of poetry, or that of teaching more broadly.[16] Her pedagogical choices emerge as a product of an interrelated weaving of individual and social subjectivities, not so neatly delineated.

To work to articulate this collapsing of the binary and sense of interconnectedness between mind and action, I turn again to Karen Barad's agential realism to rethink the logic of binaries. Relying on Barad's (2007) concepts of entanglement and intra-action, we might locate

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[16] For a discussion on whether or not teaching constitutes a practice, please turn to Chapter 4.

more accurate language for the co-constitutive properties of mind/action or individual/social. Diffraction brings to light the entangled nature of things (and "is itself an entangled phenomenon") (p. 73); it attends to entanglements as it reads entities through each other. As opposed to dualistic readings of causality or binary notions of interaction where separate entities enter into a reciprocal relationship with one another, intra-action posits the co-constitutive, inseparable nature of relationships. Intra-action does not result from absolute or distinct entities (or binaries) but instead emerges from within the relationship (not outside of it). Intra-activity is thus consistently dynamic and full of potentialities: "Possibilities are reconfigured and reconfiguring. There is a vitality to the liveliness of intra-activity" (Barad, 2007, p. 177). Thus, the mind/action/body relationship is a lively and entangled one, co-constructing itself—each dimension inseparable and at work on the other. To call upon our previous example, the teacher's activity in the classroom is not just an expression of practice, social character, and her inner life, but a site where these realms interact and possibly reconfigure each other.

For Wittgenstein, the mind is "constituted within and carried by practices" and, further, the "human body is the site for [its] expression" (Schatzki, 1996, pp. 24-25). To examine practice is to work toward comprehending the ontological nature of social life and the individual's embodied place within it, a place of entangled intra-activity amidst a complex and protean *Zusammenhang,* a state of held-togetherness. A place where *habitus* is reconfigured and reconfiguring. Looking at classroom practices this way posits that the held-togetherness, entanglement, and vitality are all at work in a given classroom space and that such a reality assists us in grasping the classroom's possibilities as a space of complex formation and potential site for meaning-making.

Further, when Wittgenstein considers mentality, he does so through liberal use of the word *Zustand,* meaning "state" or "condition," inside of which states of consciousness exist alongside *Züstande*—"emotions and moods as well as forms of conviction such as doubt and belief" (Schatzki, 1996, p. 30)—to articulate ways of being. If the mind is inclusive of priorities and dispositions—convictions, doubts, and beliefs—it follows that these too are "constituted within and carried by practices" and thus expressed in practice. To the pedagogue, this notion is sensible: we do our best to teach in accordance with our convictions and beliefs about best practice, about the role of education, about the world, and so on. As we continue to engage in the complex task of teaching and seek to be excellent in it, we further journey toward and realize goods internal to teaching. Such goods are unlikely to be external but, instead, reflective internally in *Zustand*. Yet, if we also consider the non-causal intra-activity between convictions and actions, or more literally between priorities and pedagogy, actions also, in turn, reconfigure convictions. That is, there is a subtle, ever-shifting reciprocity among the way pedagogical practice forms the teacher's (and all other participants') beliefs, doubts, and convictions and the way the teacher's mental state finds embodied expression in her institution of pedagogical practice.

If states of mind, *Zustand*, find expression in embodied practices, then it follows that pedagogical practices have specific mental states included within their purview. In explaining Wittgenstein's conception of the relationship between such internal conditions and their appearance, Schatzki uses the examples of anxiety and belief in God. Both internal conditions of the individual—anxiety and belief—make themselves known through physical manifestations, nervous fidgeting "can make present anxiety" (1996, p. 31) just as genuflecting and praying might present and express a belief in God. Considering how conditions of mind are associated

with or expressed by practices in the classroom, we might wonder about what kinds of practices constitute, carry, and express states of confidence, curiosity, disciplinary competence and fluency, collaboration, and appreciation for literature, among a host of other educational and affective aims. Practices like student-directed literature circles? Or independent reading at the start of each class? Or—to borrow a phrase from the formerly-cited Billy Collins—"t[ying] a poem to a chair with rope and tortur[ing] a confession out of it" (2018, p. 58)? Though Collins' evocative image exemplifies what not to do with poetry and, by extension, literature in classrooms, it highlights how practices are "inconceivable" without things and bodies (Nicolini, 2012, p. 4), and how practices express both social and internal mind.

Nicolini, describing practice theory's emphasis on embodiment, and on practice as an active phenomenon, turns to the example of the school—a helpful one for our purposes. First, Nicolini writes, "The social order that we call a class is, thus, largely inscribed in the bodies of all participants, and manifests through particular bodily (and discursive) practices" (2013, p. 4). The practices we engage in, the practices I aim to consider here, are physical: the student's scratching of a ballpoint pen in the marginal space beside a poem, represented by black ink letters and printed that morning on an 8.5 x 11 white sheet of paper that the teacher piled atop 30 (or 60 or 180) other copies of the same poem and carried to her classroom in one hand, coffee in the other—for instance. The actions of both teacher and student here exemplify embodied habituated activity. Nicolini continues,

> Seeing a class as the coming together of the activities of its participants also foregrounds the active role of objects. Objects, in fact, both make practices durable and connect practices with each other across space and time. For one thing, the seats in the classroom (likely facing the teacher) and the rest of the objects in the room (board, clock, etc.)

> actively participate in both producing and perpetuating the activity of conducting a class. Teachers do not have to negotiate roles and the division of labor (who has the right to speak and who is supposed to take notes) with students every time they start a class, as the objects take care of most of this. And they do not have to make too much effort to keep attention focused on them, as the desk orientation does much of the work. (2013, p. 4)

Alive in the material, affective, and social environment of the classroom are durable practices, participatory objects, and their design. In Esther's classroom, she has arranged desks in collaborative configurations and projected a countdown on the board while upbeat music plays. In Maeve's classroom, no one speaks over the poem as it is projected full-screen on the board—little letters holding so much space—and heard aloud. In either example, the roles do not need negotiating as the material objects orient the response. This is a structure that has happened before—a way the particular class's coming together of activities makes sense, the objects assisting in the felt *habitus*.

The vocabulary of the practice view "amounts to a novel picture of the social and of human agency" (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 244). How things are—in this example and for this study—is a product of those who arrange the seats in the classroom and those who sit in them, the teacher and her students. The structured environment of the classroom maintains itself without "too much effort" (Nicolini, 2013, p. 4) as a result of decisions made by those involved about what it will look like and how it will go, and the subsequent implementation of such decisions that becomes a kind of flexible second-nature that dictates the terms, conditions, and ways of engagement. We make the practices, yet the structure folds if we do not participate in the practices. Any early-career teacher knows this to be true. I remember a kind of mystification

during my first year in the classroom regarding which practices would take hold while others would fade from view—dependent on the mutuality, agency, personality, and room configuration involved. While no two class periods teaching Langston Hughes' "Theme for English B" (1951/2001) go the same way, they are typically *similar enough* to both achieve a similar practical formation as "English class" for both student and teacher. The classroom is socially constructed and maintained, situated in particular space and time, imbued with agency and, furthermore, teeming with possibility. Such possibilities live in the arrangement of desks and other material objects, yet also in the *doing*—what activity in the classroom looks like, what "mind" such activity *expresses*, and what such activity makes intelligible for its participants.

Bourdieu articulates the situatedness of practices as a person's way of being in the world as having been "produced by different modes of generation, that is, by conditions of existence which, in imposing different definitions of the impossible, the possible, and the probable, cause one group to experience as natural or reasonable practices or aspirations which another group finds unthinkable or scandalous, and vice versa" (1972, p. 78). What one teacher considers impossible, possible, and probable is situated and constrained by the forces of the environment in which she finds herself. Reasonable or natural classroom practice is similarly situated. Even if therein lies infinite ways to approach a lesson, text, or school year, the practices that occur or can occur happen within parameters that dictate what is possible, unthinkable, and so on—many such parameters are familiar to us, such as bell schedules, curriculum, testing, let alone larger structures quietly at work upon the school ecosystem.

In today's milieu, with an eye to the ways in which systems come to bear upon human lives, the relationship between practices and their contexts might seem ossified. For example, a teacher's classroom practices might be understood as predetermined by the demands of state and

national testing and the resulting rigid curricula. Yet, the practice view affords a generative and intertwined understanding of practices and contexts, human agents, and the structures wherein they find themselves. Practical environments produce *habitus; habitus*—as that pre-reflective, dispositional know-how—determines what those inside these environments deem impossible, possible, or probable. And while poetry instruction is often relegated to the sidelines in a larger schooling culture of accountability and metrics, I wonder about practices that produce a *habitus* legible to the larger system that nevertheless embody new and different senses of what is possible and, ultimately, a shift in the kinds of goods we prioritize. Too, I wonder about leveraging the agency a teacher has within her given school or district infrastructure, albeit limited to varying degrees, to effect practice-level changes that result in new contours of *habitus* and new realizations of value. Maeve reflects on her first two weeks reading a poem to start class each day after years of eliminating the ritual:

> I think even saying that without saying it, we teach kids what's important by how we spend 48 minutes every day. And so if 40 seconds are on a beautiful, short poem, why not? Right? It just seems so silly now, when I think about eliminating certain things, or just where I felt the time crunch or shifts.

Though this reflection does not necessarily indicate a new classroom *habitus,* Maeve speaks to the agency—even if in a decision that changes 40 seconds of a class period—possible within the larger schooling structure. Further, there's a sense of distinct goods internal to such a practice that might not be there with another kind of "bell ringer" activity, something more beautiful and worth the time. Something meaningful. "In deciding what goods to prioritise," Chris Higgins writes in *The Good Life of Teaching* (2011), "we define ourselves and give shape to our lives" (p. 52). This is the wisdom inherent in Maeve's contemplation of her limited, yet not fully un-

autonomous, 48 minutes. Why not spend 40 seconds projecting a poem on the board, creating a moment of silence and attention, and, in those material and affective ways, have poetry stand as an embodied, defining, and shaping dimension of classroom practice?

The practice view challenges the Western intellectualist notion that privileges knowledge as the supreme ontological principle and continues in Marx's materialist legacy that the sensuous, the fleshy, the "real-life" everyday goings on of people are not only worthwhile for study but a truer ground for understanding.[17] As I am concerned with the real everyday doings and happenings of English Language Arts classrooms and their practices with poetry, the practice view helps ground the inquiry in the tangible, the social, and the affective—considering core features of the practice view: activity, materiality, agency, knowledge, and learning. As such, it serves both as conceptual framework and methodology.

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[17] "In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, or imagined, conceived in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men and on the basis of their real life process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics and all the rest of the ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness no longer seem to be independent. They have no history or development. … Rather, men who develop their material production and their material relationship alter their thinking and the products of their thinking along with their real existence. Consciousness does not determine life, but life determines consciousness" (Marx, 1845)

Caesura 3

Yesterday's Lesson on Haiku

for the class of 2019

Watching Bashō's frog

jump into the silent pond

We trace the ripples

Writing is witness

Making something visible

We tap against desks

Drumming noticings

Between key strokes, pen scratches

A rare, full quiet

Winter sun slices

Prismatic through broken blinds

Curling poster edges glow

"I think I got one."

The boy in the windbreaker

His notebook ajar:

Teacher jots down the

Meaning of life on whiteboard.

She then writes PLEASE SAVE

Bags zip, the bell rings

Desks screech the linoleum

We follow our cues

Silence again. The

Inky mug full of Expos

Nods to testify

Chapter 4: The Practices of Teaching and Teaching Poetry

In this section, I will turn squarely to MacIntyre's corner of the practice view conversation. By charting practice as something more systematic and conscious, MacIntyre narrows what counts as a practice and, subsequently, broadens the purview of any given practice. When he writes, "Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess" (MacIntyre, 2013, p. 187), his strict boundary regarding what constitutes practice encompasses a host of smaller doings. Now the practice of the game of football, in MacIntyre's sense, encompasses the activities of lifting weights, throwing a football with skill, participating in drills, studying game tape, and other unknowable dimensions that exist in a particular *habitus*. In short, MacIntyre posits practices as those which are consciously taken up, much like traditions. Bourdieu would not agree with this view. And while I am going to think with MacIntyre's particular kind of definition of practice in the coming chapter, finding his emphasis on practices as consciously articulated traditions with goods internal to them helpful to limn some core aspects of teaching and poetry, such a view does not fully account for the ways that practices are unconscious and hidden in plain sight.

Further, I draw upon MacIntyre's definition of and insight into practice while parting with his claim that teaching itself is not a practice, a departure which appeals to Chris Higgins' rebuttal of MacIntrye. I do so with the caveat that there are unnamed, unseen, and unknowable forms of practice that, though not so neatly categorized, also contain goods internal to them. Conceiving of teaching as a practice in its own right, not just a subset of other practices, I sketch a space for the *teaching of poetry* as a practice distinct from the practices of teaching or poetry in general. Treating the teaching of poetry as a discrete practice offers us a means through which we might best realize the goods internal to working with poetry and students. For part of such a

sketch, I conceptualize teaching poetry as a practice through Schatzki's (2002) four main elements that constitute practice: practical understanding, rules, teleo-affective structure, and general understanding. Finally, I look closer at the notion of apprenticeship and the role of the institution as necessary features for discussions of practice, particularly considered through the teaching of poetry.

4.1 Teaching as Practice

Alasdair MacIntyre controversially claimed, "Teaching itself is not a practice, but a set of skills and habits, put to the service of a variety of practices" (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, p. 5). As all practices require some kind of learning and instruction, teaching, for MacIntyre, is not a practice in its own right but a constituent part of any given practice. Teaching does not point its practitioners back to itself. Simply put, the goal of teaching is not to apprentice students to become teachers. MacIntyre continues, "The teacher should think of her or himself as a mathematician, a reader of poetry, an historian or whatever, engaged in communicating craft and knowledge to apprentices. It follows that you cannot train teachers well, until they have been educated into whatever discipline it is that they are to transmit" (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, p. 5). In this conception, the identity and self-conception of the teacher swear allegiance to the subsequent disciplinary subject of the classroom—math, poetry, history. The teaching of said subjects is for the sake of those subjects, and the goods internal to teaching those subjects mirrors the goods internal to the subjects themselves—teaching history yields the same goods a historian experiences, the math teacher and the mathematician, the English Language Arts teacher and the poet, and so on. MacIntyre further articulates this notion by noting that the life of the teacher is a nebulous, unspecified one, lacking unifying characteristics:

> All teaching is for the sake of something else and so teaching does not have its own goods. The life of a teacher is therefore not a specific kind of life. The life of a teacher of mathematics, whose goods are the goods of mathematics, is one thing; a life of a teacher of music whose goods are the goods of music is another. (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, p. 9)

We might ask if MacIntyre fully captures the differences between the mathematician as such and the high school teacher of mathematics. Do the mathematician and the mathematics teacher go to work for the same reasons? Do they realize the same exact goods through their years of practice? The life of a teacher is spent in fundamentally different material conditions than the life of its corresponding discipline-specific profession—the high school chemistry teacher, teaching five lessons a day on chemical bonds to five different groups of seventeen-year-olds, dictated by a bell schedule and subsumed under a litany of parent emails does not have the same kind of life as the chemist conducting research in a lab. The high school English Language Arts teacher, also teaching under fluorescent lights five lessons a day that involve learning targets; grammar instruction; reading, writing, and discussion skills; and the shuffling of desks into a circle to host a Socratic Seminar does not have the same kind of life as the literary critic. The teachers might have their work interrupted by a fire drill; sit in meetings with case workers, students, and families; or dress up in some obscure costume for an assembly. The chemist and literary critic, not so. In Nicolini's frame, the difference in their practices are embodied, inscribed in both bodily and discursive manifestations. Overlapping raw material, the equation in the case of math teacher and mathematician or the poem shared by the English teacher and literary critic, does not indicate or demand a shared approach to said material. Just as the literary critic and the poet are engaged in different practices—insofar as they engage in different activities and take up distinct

postures, dispositions, and attitudes toward the poem—the teacher of a given discipline engages with that discipline in a manner discrete and not entirely analogous to the practitioners of those disciplines.

Chris Higgins (2011), refuting MacIntyre's assertion that teaching cannot be categorized as a practice, writes that "the calling of a teacher, much as it involves initiation into practices, ultimately exceeds that role" (p. 197). Teaching is not merely a diminutive fragment of other practices but something that *exceeds* the traditional boundaries of the respective practice of which it is considered to be a fragment. The teacher works on the level of the disciplinary practice—math, science, English, history—and then on the level of the teaching life. Higgins calls this second level "the level of individual life narratives" (p. 198), pointing to the work of community-making as a key dimension of the teaching practice—something MacIntyre does consider a feature of practice.

Despite my earlier departure from his notion that teaching is not a practice, I turn to MacIntyre's trenchant analysis of some of the ills that plague contemporary schooling. MacIntyre describes our "conception of the school" as "impoverished:"

> if we understand it as merely a preparatory institution, within which the students are contained until they are ready to participate in 'the real thing.' In good schools students already become practitioners of arts, sciences, and games, participants in such activities as reading novels and poetry with both discrimination and intensity, devising new experiments in which their mathematical skills can be put to use, drawing and painting and making music to some purpose. (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, p. 9)

So much of what we bemoan in education are the parts that have come to feel like arbitrary ways of doing school—that *school* itself is somehow the goal instead of learning or becoming. Too

often students are barred from participating in the actual practices corresponding to the disciplines listed on their course schedules. We can think of how seldom it is that English Language Arts students get the opportunity to write their own fiction and poetry, as opposed to the nearly-exclusive time spent analyzing it. We can also think of how often the writing teacher searches for ways to create opportunities for her students to write for and to authentic audiences instead of arbitrarily answering prompts, striving to give her students "the real thing" instead of mere preparation for it. In this way, MacIntyre's emphasis on the discipline-specific aspect of the teaching practice gets at a fundamental insight into the nature of teaching when done well—allowing teacher and student alike to participate in the practice in question, in "the real thing." Or, as Higgins puts it, "Students and teachers alike sag under the realisation that what they are mainly doing in school is school and not chemistry, math, or French" (2011, p. 193). Tying the poem to a chair to torture a confession out of it (Collins, 2018, p. 58) is not poetry, it is school.

The participation in both the world of a practice and the particular world of a school affords a window into the goods internal to teaching. Goods internal to a practice are those that "are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity" (MacIntyre, 2013, p. 187). There certainly are standards of excellence that define good teaching. Take the Danielson framework or any number of mechanisms for evaluation that give language to what excellence in the craft might look like—pedagogical and content knowledge, assessment that informs instruction, fostering a collaborative learning environment, relationship building with students, effective planning and record-keeping procedures, and so on. Working toward the standards of excellence set forth by teaching—some of which are not external to the craft itself but determined by whether or not learning has taken place—yields different kinds of goods than practicing in a

specific discipline (historian, poet) might. A particular kind of *habitus,* social practices and know-how, exists for the teacher. Yet, just as teaching poetry is not the same as being a poet, neither is teaching poetry the same as teaching chemistry. The goods are layered—of teaching and of the discipline in mind—and greater than the sum of their parts.

Realizing the goods internal to the practices in which we engage—and here teaching will be considered a practice in and of itself—bolsters those practices as worthwhile. If the practice of teaching, just like any other practice, is "genuine," then it "becomes home to distinctive goods" (Higgins, 2011, p. 50). Those distinctive goods give the practitioner a particular angle on what it is to live well. Higgins continues,

> Practices such as architecture, baseball, and chemistry do more than produce buildings, pennant races, and periodic tables: each discloses a different aspect of human flourishing. It is inside such worlds of practice that practitioners encounter thick and distinctive notions about what it is worthwhile to participate in, excellent to achieve, and admirable to become. (2011, p. 50)

Just as participation in the practices of architecture, baseball, and chemistry reveals dimensions of human flourishing, the practice of teaching is made up of conceptions of the excellent and admirable which, in turn, are distinct products of the world of teaching. With this view, we can see that teachers do far more than meet relative goals by training learners to develop specific competencies, preparing students to pass state exams, and producing graduates. In revealing aspects of human flourishing unique to it, teaching itself becomes a site for reflection on certain meaningful dimensions of human life. Or, rather, certain meaning can only be made from within the practice of teaching. In this view, the specific goods of teaching can become objects of reflection and ends at which teachers aim. I posed the notion of "goods internal to practice" to

Esther, Maeve, and Frank. Each of them gave language to a number of different "goods" from their experience as high school English teachers. I have pasted excerpts from our conversations below to represent their answers in full:

Table 4: Esther, Maeve, and Frank on Teaching as a Practice.

Esther	(1)	So some of the things that I think about a lot is the value of being able to find fun in learning and I think it's not to say that I think every class is going to be fun, but I want there to be an element of engagement to a certain extent. Because I think—and I don't know if this is the 'goods' thing—but I think sometimes it's hard enough to be in school, and I remember being a teenager, just going from class to class is really exhausting. And if I'm gonna spend 45 minutes somewhere, I want it to feel worth it.
	(2)	I love to see the text more through their eyes; it shows me more meaning than I could grasp for myself. So I'm learning different understandings of a text. I am grasping details that I wouldn't have caught initially on my first read that they have. I think there's this idea that the teacher's teaching and the students are learning, but I think the beauty of literature is that whatever I pick up first is not going to be the same as another person, and at the end of the day, we are just people who are reading a text. And I think I just really like this idea of being able to see what they pick up on, and what I can learn from that. I hope that it helps me to see the text more beyond what I usually can because I have my own biases and my own desires to see a text a certain way, because of what I'm personally focused on in my life, right? Like where I'm at in life. And I constantly have to remind myself that even though I'm an adult now, I was once a teenager.
Maeve	(1)	I think one of the things that comes to mind is just an inclination or an ability to see potential in situations. I feel like teaching makes your knee-jerk reaction, 'Well, what can we do here?' Whether it's in a book or a physical space or a student, so much of teaching is making something out of nothing. Right? Whether it's working with this tiny closet, we have as indoor space for softball practice, or a broken projector, or a hybrid room, or a student who hates reading. So I think it has curved me toward seeing or looking for potential in people or things.
	(2)	I approach teaching now kind of like problem-solving, like not me solving the problems, but, me removing barriers. I remember people talking about that. Just getting out of the way. I think I used to see teaching as wanting to take what's in my brain and put it into kids, into students. And now I think, it's almost like a learning versus unlearning. It's a peeling back for all of the things that guard students from wanting to learn, peeling back—whether it's a phone or a kid in the class they use to date or an aversion to reading—just trying to peel back whatever makes them so guarded toward it.
	(3)	I guess the last one I would say would just be attention. I think the biggest thing with teaching is just that everything requires attention—demands it. Whether it's a kid asking to go to the bathroom or grading the zillionth essay and stuff like that. It is just attention and seeing, in a way I didn't have before.

Frank (1) Even as a first-year teacher, I've been thinking about this a lot. I was watching Ocean Vuong, and they were speaking about their class—because they're a teacher at NYU or something—and they're speaking about something that really resonated with me and I've been thinking about it a lot. Being a teacher makes you really good at seeing what you're lacking. They said it really much more eloquently. But you're constantly self-aware, you're constantly reflecting, you're constantly reviewing, 'What could I have done better?' Right? So if anything, a virtue of practice for us is like neuroticism or something. Just self-criticism, you know, constant self-awareness—at least to be an effective educator in my mind. I think self-awareness is something that a lot of my mentor teachers… They're even asking me, 'Do you think that went well?' And we're all constantly asking each other these things, these pedagogical moves. I will hear conversations in our teacher's office, and they're running ideas by each other. Even if they're from different subject areas. They're like, what works with some students, what doesn't?

(2) Shifting to being an English literature and language teacher, I realize, even in my personal life, how much more critical of a reader I have to be. Even my casual enjoyment of books has been so annoying recently. I'm just looking into the use of language, 'Oh, what? How is this person being characterized? How would we describe…?' Yeah. And I'm just doing this with *The Color Purple,* really reading the same section three times a day for each class. And in every class session, I'll say something slightly different, or something slightly new. And you know, 'don't expect all the classes to be the same' and all that. But just like all these little things after 30 years of teaching, you'd probably be really in tune with little subtleties of text. It seems like such a no-brain answer, but being a teacher would just be— just makes you more critical of the written form.

I am struck by all that it is to teach when I read these conversations side-by-side. From this small sampling, we can glean that the practice of teaching renders it worthwhile to participate in communities that allow us to see beyond ourselves, where learning is dialogic, relational, and fun (Esther 2). Further, that the practice of teaching involves cross-disciplinary communities that transcend age and experience gaps in the name of spit balling ideas about best practice (Frank 1). What is excellent to achieve in the practice of teaching is a sense of flexibility, resourcefulness, and readiness to find and capitalize on potential (Maeve 1) and an attunement to the subtleties of a text (Frank 2). And, perhaps, most present, is what is admirable to become—empathetic (Esther 1 and 2), unselfish (Maeve 2), attentive (Maeve 3), self-aware

and reflective (Frank 1), and someone who takes responsibility for how they treat the time of others (Esther 1). While this list is not exhaustive, we can begin to see the teachers' own conceptions of the excellencies and virtues required by teaching. Flourishing in teaching demands something of teachers. As they grow into competency and awareness of the "thick and distinctive notions about what it is worthwhile to participate in, excellent to achieve, and admirable to become" (Higgins, 2011, p. 50), these teachers name something about what it means to flourish as both a teacher and as a person. Further, these "goods" develop irrespective of the teacher's product and speak to the way the practice of teaching exceeds the act of initiation into a larger discipline-bound practice. To initiate someone—a room of teenagers—into a disciplinary practice does not happen only through the skills associated with that practice, though such knowledge is essential, but also with competencies specific to the teaching practice.

4.2 The Teaching of Poetry as a Practice

Though overlapping with the goods of teaching and the goods of poetry, teaching poetry seems to me a distinct practice with its own distinct set of goods—goods that might remain legible to those listed above but with a particular slant toward the content of the teaching. I attempt to sketch some of this distinctiveness by calling upon Schatzki's framework of the four elements of practice. Before doing so, however, I want to make two distinctions. First, it has been my experience that those teachers interested in teaching poetry, who embrace it as a practice beyond including a poem for instrumental uses, are somewhat zealous. They are enthusiastic about the form and its potential, they have favorite poems, stories about memorable encounters with students and poetry, bookshelves of poetry, and notebooks of their own poetry-making. This is a rarer kind of English Language Arts teacher, as we discussed in Chapter 1. We could attribute this rarity to poetry's strangeness and highly technical nature, elements that

certainly contribute to why teaching poetry is often a polarizing topic. Yet, on the *positive* side of the scale, if we look at those who have poetry-rich classrooms, there is a sense of compounding returns. In an analogous way to how MacIntrye describes practices and articulates how the internal goods of a practice reveal themselves over time, moral philosopher Talbert Brewer writes of dialectical activities. I include Brewer's words here and suggest we read them with the teaching of poetry in mind:

> Dialectical activities are a familiar part of almost any human life. The category includes all those activities whose point lies in an intrinsic goodness that is to some considerable degree opaque to those who lack experience with the activity, but that tends to unveil itself incrementally as one gains first-hand experience with it. Whenever we undertake to kindle a friendship, initiate an intimate love relationship, parent a child, start up a conversation with an intriguing stranger, or deepen our appreciation of an unfamiliar genre of music, we are initiating an activity whose value cannot be grasped with perfect lucidity from the outset, but must be progressively clarified via engagement in the activity itself. (Brewer, 2009, p. 39)

Brewer here draws a connection between knowledge and participation. While most practices can at least be observed from the outside and known *about*, in some sense, true knowledge of a practice demands sustained participation. The practice of those teachers who work with poetry—their ritualistic reading of a poem to start class, their carving out class time every other Friday for a student poetry slam, and their habit of writing poetry alongside their students—exemplify what is often considerably opaque to those who hesitate or neglect to engage poetry in their classrooms. *You do what*? *There isn't time!* Teaching poetry is an activity that does not provide immediate gratification; full initiation into the world of poetry, for both the teacher and the

student, takes time and effort. Poetry works in increments and in slowness. It is "progressively clarified via engagement in the activity itself." A teacher might come to love teaching poetry after years of it unveiling itself to her. The same might be true with a student and their reading.

While this slow burn, this need to engage and re-engage, is a feature of a wide number of practices, poetry demands a particularly careful pace. Poetry's formal elements and focus on meaning make it something to be savored far longer than most other teaching content. The algebra equation holds fewer new truths for the veteran math teacher than the poem might for the seasoned teacher of poetry. The teacher of poetry, reading a given poem several times a day, several years over a career, partners with the poem to participate in the deepening of her own engagement. Capturing the goods internal to the repeated poetry reading/teaching and increased intimacy of engagement, Jan Zwicky likens the reader of poetry to connoisseurs and experts "who continually re-savour masterpieces, who re-experience, each time, what they experienced the first time: the shock of meaning" (2020, p. 31). She continues, "A great poem offers us this shock. It is always fresh because each time we read it, our mind experiences a gestalt shift with a pay-off: truth. 'Recognize,' then, does not mean 'see the same old same old'; it means re-cognize — that is, experience the shift in gestalts" (p. 31). And all this is just about the re-cognizing afforded in *reading* the poem, let alone the re-cognizing available in teaching it and dialoguing about it with young people over and again, only multiplying the freshness.

From my former classroom, I remember such progressive clarification when I recall Ted Kooser's "Swinging from Parents" (2014).[18] As I developed in my teaching practice and grew

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[18] Ted Kooser, "Swinging from Parents" from *Kindest Regards: New and Selected Poems.* Copyright © 2014 by Ted Kooser. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company LLC on behalf of Copper Canyon Press, www.coppercanyonpress.org.

older, I watched group after group of seniors graduate and witnessed my friends and peers start to have children, I gradually came to relish Kooser's words,

> **Swinging from Parents**
>
> The child walks between her father and mother,
>
> holding their hands. She makes the shape of the *y*
>
> at the end of *infancy*, and lifts her feet
>
> the way the *y* pulls up its feet, and swings
>
> like the *v* in *love*, between an *o* and an *e*
>
> who are strong and steady and as far as she knows
>
> will be there to swing from forever. Sometimes
>
> her father, using his free hand, points to something
>
> and says its name, the way the arm of the *r*
>
> points into the future at the end of *father*.
>
> Or the *r* at the end of *forever*. It's that *forever*
>
> the child puts her trust in, lifting her knees,
>
> swinging her feet out over the world.

I had always admired the way the letters danced on the page, acting out what the poem was about—the image of the "*y*'s" feet and the "*r*'s" arm's reach. I thought the poem was accessible, interesting, and sweet in the sentimental way I find teenagers enjoy (though they may, at first, hesitate to admit it). Every May, I read and discussed the child "swinging her feet out over the world" with a new group of students; watching the faces change in front of me, I felt the tender peace of loving those you cannot hold onto forever. I felt the shock of re-experienced meaning, of a more robust sense-making than I had on first read as a not-yet-teacher.

In addition to the slow, progressive, and rewarding nature of poetry, its teaching feels distinct for a second reason: that its foremost concern as a practice is meaning. The qualities of poetry discussed in Chapter 2, its economy of form, its play with abstraction, its inextricability from language, its attention cultivating capacities, and, ultimately, its proclivity to nurture the capacity to make meaning are only further amplified when considered as the primary concerns of a community of practice. If the "task of the poet is to use language—a naturally linear medium that lends itself to the specification of discrete particulars—to gesture towards the resonant structure she has discerned so that we, as readers, can see through the poem to a way the world is" (Zwicky, 2020, p. 27), then the task of the poetry teacher is to demonstrate that language allows us to see through the poem and out to the way the world is. To teach poetry is to make the resonant internal structure of language a pedagogical priority, to take seriously the act of perceiving gestalts and making meaning. The kind of gestalt perception poetry invites us to practice is not the causal, one thing after the other thinking our world and schools are so fluent in, but the spontaneous experience of meaning. Thus, resonant internal structures—for example, understanding to what effect Kooser utilizes the shapes of the "*y"* and "*r"*—are meant to be experienced, not explained. *See how the "y" curls up like a pair of feet? Well, the speaker is talking about a kid who is no longer an infant, and…* Zwicky describes the practice of teaching poetry as analogous to that of "teaching medical students how to read symptoms" in that it "is an attempt to assist others in the perception of gestalts" (2020, p. 35). She continues, "How do we do this? Curiously, it turns out that teaching a poem is in many respects like writing one: you start with that old workshop adage, 'Show, don't tell'" (p. 35). How do we get our students to grow in their perception of gestalts? How do we show, not tell them?

One of the internal goods of teaching poetry is that we get to concern ourselves with gestalts—troubling over how to make them visible to students and to provoke new ways of seeing. Will a bit of historical context help the students perceive the whole of the poem? A note about the particular poetic form? Music played in the background? A related writing prompt beforehand? Pairing one poem with another? Whatever moves in our pedagogical arsenal, they are those geared toward helping the student perceive. Carrying out such a pedagogy is not only the activity of comprehending the poem's meaning, but reaching beyond it, *exceeding the practice of poetry*, and wondering about how to aid a classroom full of others toward meaning. Zwicky describes this showing act as "setting details side by side and allowing the mind of the reader to form a gestalt" where "we are goosing intelligence into activity, insisting that it come alive:"

> 'Oh, I get what's happening!' When you tell someone something, on the other hand, you invite passivity: you turn the mind into a bucket for facts, or maybe a data processor. You deny it the excitement of being an animal, the *experience* of understanding. The same goes for teaching. If you tell a potential reader what a poem is about, she won't have the experience of *finding the gestalt*. But if you help her focus her attention on crucial details, her mind can become active in sensing the resonance among them. (2020, p. 36)

Teaching poetry cultivates our ways of seeing and our ways of attending—for teacher and student. In a certain way, then, it is learning itself. The kind of attention required for working with poetry is akin to the kind of careful attention required to learn a craft. Cultural critic Matthew Crawford in *Shop Class as Soul Craft* (2009) writes of this quality of attention:

> Getting it right demands that you be *attentive* in the way of a conversation rather than *assertive* in the way of a demonstration. I believe the mechanical arts have a special

significance for our time because they cultivate not creativity, but the less glamorous virtue of attentiveness. Things need fixing and tending no less than creating. (p. 82, emphasis original)

Though writing about motorcycle repair, Crawford's insight into the virtue of attentiveness resonates with the work of the poetry teacher for the work has the character of a dynamic conversation rather than an assertive, one-way demonstration. Again, I remember Oliver—"pay attention" (2009a, p. 37). The kind of learning poetry makes possible is the kind that resists two rampant impulses: (1) turning "the mind as a bucket for facts" (Zwicky, 2020, p. 36), replicable by AI, and (2) wielding knowledge as a means for self-assertion in lieu of actual learning or listening. Attending to meaning, tending carefully to the details that wonderfully constitute a whole poem and the kind of sight that makes such attending possible, is a worthwhile practice in which to participate. As such, the kinds of conversations the poem offers the teacher are those we dream of when we become English teachers—conversations about life and all its contours, conversations where deep listening and careful attention enliven a room, conversations where the classroom experiences the thrill of meaning together.

4.3 Schatzki's Four Elements of Practice

Though we have been primarily working within MacIntyre's notion of practice, I now turn to Schatzki to assist in articulating the way we might understand the teaching of poetry as a practice. I am interested in what such an inquiry will yield in my effort to better understand the whole of poetry teaching—its how's, why's, doings, and goods. Schatzki defines practices as "open-ended spatial-temporal manifolds of actions" (2005, p. 471), as "sets of doings and sayings" (1996, p. 106), and as a "bundle of activities" that embrace both structure and organization (2002, p. 71). Different types of doings and sayings might constitute the same type

of action or task. We can think of the many different ways a teacher might teach a poem—the manifold doings and sayings possible—that nonetheless constitute the same task of teaching poetry. As such, practices are made up of a flexible set of doings and sayings that, though sometimes regularly occur, need not repeat. The particular doings and sayings at any given time are organized by what is practically intelligible, by what makes sense for people to do. Doings and sayings "hang together" to compose a practice (Schatzki, 2002, p. 77) and are organized by four phenomena we will consider here: practical understanding, rules, teleo-affective structure, and general understanding. With these four elements in mind, coupled with the view that teaching itself constitutes a practice in the MacIntyrian sense, I read the kinds of things teachers do to help their students grow in their engagement with poetry. How do they nurture their students in this way? What is it to grow as a poet? A reader of poetry? *How*—through what doings—does this happen? What is it to teach poetry? What ends does the teacher of poetry hope for—for her students or herself?

1. Practical Understanding

Schatzki describes practical understanding as "knowing how to X, knowing how to identify X-ings, and knowing how to prompt as well as respond to X-ings" (2002, p. 77). In short, the first element of practice is competence. Here we remember Bourdieu's *habitus*, a feel for the game. For the poetry teacher, competence, or know-how, means knowing how to teach poetry, identifying what good teaching of poetry looks like, and knowing how to prompt as well as respond to poetry. We might take the example of a classroom slam poetry session, the participants in it have a certain know-how of when to snap, when to react nonverbally, how many times a poet might share, and what kinds of poems are best read at a slam—i.e. not selecting a poem of Homerian epic length, instead preferring one that involves rhythm,

wordplay, or the utilization of sound devices. All of these practical understandings of how a poetry slam works reveal a competence that makes the doings and sayings coherent as part of a practice. More broadly, for a teacher to be competent at the practice of teaching poetry they have to understand the practice of teaching poetry, i.e. they have to know how poetry works, have to be able to identify poetry that does work, and know how to utilize it in some way. They know when the appropriate time is for a poem, and they know how to react when they hear a poem. The teacher's grasp of the poem is itself part of the know-how, set alongside the teacher's grasp of teaching it. I asked Maeve, Esther, and Frank about their practices for grasping a poem, whether in their own personal reading or for the purposes of preparing to teach that poem. How do teachers themselves understand poetry? How do teachers identify good poetry? Good poetry teaching?

In their approaches to poetry itself, Frank, Maeve, and Esther stressed a variety of features of the form. Frank spoke of the ability of poetry to articulate our political realities and his enjoyment of the formal qualities in poetry—both of which he incorporates in his classroom. Maeve stressed the "stickiness" of poetry, the way it gives language to the texture of our lives, and poetry's spatial dimensions. Esther stressed poetry's musicality. Each had an idea of how poetry worked as a specific form, distinguishing it from literature more broadly.

Describing his current poetry reading practice, Frank refers to poetry as a way to "get a grasp of what people are experiencing in certain situations." At the time of our conversation in January of 2024, he was reading Mahmoud Darwish and "Mohammed El-Kurd, [who] wrote this book called *Rifqa*, which is gorgeous, just heartbreaking, and just—very beautifully written and kind of gives you a lot of insight into how people in Palestine feel about what's currently happening, what's been happening for decades." Similarly, he just finished *Postcolonial Love*

Poem by the Mojave American poet, Natalie Diaz. Reflecting on the kind of insight reading political poetry affords, Frank reflected, "this comes into play when I'm thinking about how do I teach poetry? Because what kind of things do I want to bring in the classroom?" If part of the practice of teaching poetry involves Schatzki's notion that practitioners know "how to X," "identify X-ings" and "how to prompt as well as respond to X-ings" (2002, p. 77), then it is easy to follow the throughline Frank traces from the kind of poetry reading he seeks out on his own—and the kind of responses and interactions he has with the poetry—to how he might incorporate such kinds of poetry and poetry reading into his own classroom. Finding meaning in personal reading and responding to poetry elicits the desire in the poetry teacher to share commensurate experiences with students. Further, understanding poetry as a space that bears witness to the stories of others, foregrounding the felt sense of experience, compels the teacher to leverage the form as a powerful site for centering historically marginalized voices, fostering empathy, promoting understanding, and prompting conversations regarding justice and politics.

While identifying good poetry to read and teach might have to do with emphasizing poetry's capacity to illuminate global, cultural, or political realities, it might also pertain to the formal qualities of poetry. Frank identifies Christina Rossetti's "Who Has Seen the Wind?"[19] to help him highlight the way imagery works in a poem and the way language and affect operate in condensed space—

Who Has Seen the Wind?

Who has seen the wind?

Neither I nor you:

But when the leaves hang trembling,

[19] Poem in the public domain.

The wind is passing through.

Who has seen the wind?

Neither you nor I:

But when the trees bow down their heads,

The wind is passing by.

Rossetti's poem makes present some of the formal realities Frank wants to make available for his students, and the poem does so without much surplus. The image of the trees personified, bowing their heads to the wind, resonates without over-explanation—it is simple and evocative enough to speak for itself. The refrain, "who has seen the wind?" prompts us to see the way the wind marks what it touches, leaving its trace. Frank also identifies Mary Oliver's "The Summer Day"[20] as a poem that similarly leverages its simplicity so that the effect of the imagery, metaphor, and repetition are easily observable:

The Summer Day

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean—

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—

who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.

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Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don’t know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down

into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,

how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,

which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

with your one wild and precious life?

We see a similar pattern here with the poet’s posed questions answered aslant through metaphor and image, eliciting a new thoughtfulness. As many readers of this poem attest, there exists the all-at-once shock of meaning in Oliver’s question, one that often finds itself quoted on laptop stickers, in graduation speeches, on coffee shop posters, and the like: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?” Frank highlights Rossetti and Oliver’s poems for their formal qualities and beauty, yet also for their clarity and approachable language—all of which are aspects of the poems that work together to identify them as suitable for the task of teaching poetry to high school students. In these choices, I see the way poetry positions itself as a vehicle for asking existential questions or questions of meaning, and that such poems, in their directness about their big questions, serve the project of meaning-making for both teacher and student.

For Maeve, identifying poetry for her own reading and for her students to read has to do with its vitality, resonance, and staying power. I remember here the language of The Academy of American Poets Life Lines project, articulating the sticky nature of poetry: “We each carry lines of poetry with us [...] we clutch these ‘life lines’ like totems, repeat them as mantras, and summon them for comfort and laughter” (1993). Maeve remembers her high school poetry class and the first poem she loved:

> I realized that people were really saying things with poetry, and that poetry was language that I could understand and use to understand my life better. I loved Todd Boss. I loved “drowning in more than my fair share of joy.” That was the one I memorized in that class, the “This Morning in a Morning Voice,” was the first poem that I really, really loved.

Todd Boss’s “This Morning in a Morning Voice” (2008)[21]:

This Morning in a Morning Voice

to beat the froggiest
of morning voices,
  my son gets out of bed
and takes a lumpish song
  along—a little lyric
learned in kindergarten,
  something about a
boat. He’s found it in
  the bog of his throat

[21] From PITCH: POEMS by Todd Boss. Copyright © 2012 by Todd Boss. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

before his feet have hit

the ground, follows

its wonky melody down

the hall and into the loo

as if it were the most

natural thing for a little

boy to do, and lets it

loose awhile in there

to a tinkling sound while

I lie still in bed, alive

like I've never been, in

love again with life,

afraid they'll find me

drowned here, drowned

in more than my fair

share of joy.

There are many lines in Boss's poem that might stick—like the ending, which Maeve quotes—but what is also sticky is this image of a father and his young and singing son, the way a small, quirky, and easily overlooked domestic moment nestles its way into significance. Maeve, caught in the glow of Boss's words, continues rifling through her poetry totems: "I think of the line, 'don't tax themselves with the forethought of grief' from 'The Peace of Wild Things.'[22] There are just certain poems where it just feels really anchoring." She then closes by summarizing,

[22] Berry (2018/2012). "The Peace of Wild Things." *The Peace of Wild Things And Other Poems.* Penguin.

> And so, yeah, now I think there are certain lines that just live in my brain that I am grateful to have. Even, like, my cousin's really sick, and I was just talking to a friend about it and thinking of the Mary Oliver line that 'we shake with grief, and we shake with joy and what a time they have both living in this body.'[23] And so I always think of those lines that you have that can explain things that it doesn't feel like prose can. I like the way that poetry is both specific and unspecific in a way that feelings feel like too.

In Maeve's quick succession of off-the-cuff weaving of poetry and memory, poetry and life, I surmise that good poetry, for her, is that which has staying power and the force to mean something off of the page. If we take Maeve as an example, what it looks like to grow as a poetry-person involves letting poetry become part of an interior landscape of meaning. Nurturing students in this way might look like Maeve's *doing* of memorizing poetry, having students memorize a poem that particularly speaks to them. The three poems mentioned here are three that Maeve shares with her students.

On the final day of my poetry course, a predominantly senior elective I taught for a handful of years, I would require such a task—that we would spend our last moments together filling the room with the lines of poetry we hoped would live in us as anchors, guides, comforts, or galvanizers. I too would participate, always re-committing to memory the poem I had tried and failed to memorize as a high school student, Wendell Berry's "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" (2012). In Schatzki's frame, competence in the practice of teaching poetry means the teacher first knows something about how poetry works, in this case that it often carries distillations of wisdom that make for memorable, personally-meaningful lines. The teacher knows how to identify such poetry and knows how to utilize it in the classroom—knowing what

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[23] "We shake with joy, we shake with grief. What a time they have, these two housed as they are in the same body." Oliver, M. (2009b). "We Shake With Joy." *Evidence: Poems*. Beacon Press.

to *do* with it practically so as to fully realize its qualities (memorization, reading a poem multiple times, meditating on diction, or *how* a poem communicates its meaning rather than merely *what* that meaning is).

Another way a poetry teacher knows how a poem works and, by extension, the *doings* through which they might teach it, is through nurturing their own reading practices—something Esther, Frank, and Maeve all stressed. Maeve puts a particular point to it by contending that part of what makes poetry so interesting to teach is its spatial qualities and the way the text works physically on a page. Reading poetry, to her, involves “marking up a page,” interacting with the relatively few words in proportion to the blank space. She notes that doing so is “fun” and that this kind of careful attention to the visual play of words on a page is what “initially comes to mind” when she thinks about teaching poetry.

What I have outlined above has more to do with the teacher interacting with poetry and extending such interactions as potential methods of engagement for their students. These are examples of the kinds of things teachers do to help nurture their students toward increased—or even joyful—engagement with poetry, yet there are a handful more *doings* Maeve, Esther, and Frank mentioned that deserve enumerating. Below, I will list additional dimensions of practice that express a kind of know-how, an articulation of what competence in the teaching of poetry looks like.

Writing alongside students. Considering the goal he has to increase opportunities for creativity and student expression in his classroom, Frank grappled with the modeling required of him for best practice. He works it out aloud,

> I want [my students] to receive an invitation to create because if something—a form—speaks to them, they should be able to engage in that form. So I think maybe to start, I

> have to—not that I have to start writing, but I think I feel like I should try to—start writing, and it doesn't have to be good. It doesn't have to be for anyone. But just try to start writing to understand what that feels like. Otherwise, it'd be hypocritical of me to expect that of my students, right? So if I can read, consume, and enjoy, and then start writing and see what that feels like, then I can understand 'Okay, what am I putting my kids through if I ask them to write this?'

Though writing alongside our students is a practice championed by composition research included but not limited to the oft-cited Kelly Gallagher's *Write Like This* (2011), it is much easier conceptualized as a *principle* of practice than a *practice* itself. Frank argues that it would be hypocritical of him to expect his students to readily tackle the kind of unfamiliar and potentially vulnerable challenge of writing a poem without having done so himself. Even in gearing himself up to do so, I read an echo of the reassurances we give to students in his words—"just start writing," "it doesn't have to be good," "it doesn't have to be for everyone." Intentionally seeking the ability to speak to the act of assembling a poem from experience, not just to getting one started, demonstrates integrity and care.

Increasing poetry exposure and volume. When conceiving of a classroom ritual in which to engage, all three teachers chose to read a daily poem. A preeminent concern they hoped to address was their knowledge and sense that student exposure to poetry was limited and detrimentally so—yielding a litany of misconceptions and distaste. Upping their students' poetry intake served to offer them a poetry repertoire closer to the breadth by which they understand musical genres or novelistic styles. Esther pulls the poetry of her classroom "from all areas of her life," attempting to capture a wide variety. Maeve speaks similarly of contemporary poetry's "high and low" range that gives her a host of potential entry points from which to work. Esther,

among a handful of other teachers I have worked with, does a “Poetry March Madness” wherein she and her students work their way through 32 poems—or sometimes 64 depending on timing. Two poems face off per day, and Esther matches them up thematically. The few weeks students engage in a poetry bracket or the year their teacher reads them a poem a day will very likely provide them more access to poetry than at any point previously within their schooling experience.

Honoring student backgrounds and experiences. Part of the teacher’s know-how is the knowledge of her students and how to best meet their learning needs. We remember the mantra, “meet your students where they are.” Part of the poetry teacher’s know-how is to realize this through the pedagogical utilization of poetry. In our conversations, Frank gave two excellent examples of the way the specific form of poetry can function as a means of engaging student backgrounds and experiences. To honor the linguistic diversity in his ELA classroom, Frank taps into the long tradition of poetry translation. “There are a lot of kids who are really proud of their English ability, and they should be for the three years they have lived in the country,” Frank tells me of his students, explaining why he chose to work with the original Roque Dalton poem, “Como Tú,” alongside the Jack Hirschman English translation “Like You” (2000) and why he wants to give more opportunities for students to translate texts from Spanish to English and vice versa. Because of his experiences as a poetry reader, Frank has a practical fluency with poetry that allows him to easily realize the previously discussed good of connecting with a more diverse set of cultures because of poetry’s economy of form. Frank intuits how poetry pulls experiences in tightly and the way its “pressed oil of words” (Hirshfield, 1997, p. 32) means that different cultures can be more fully represented and teachers can engage with their students’ backgrounds with more agility and finesse.

While poetry offers a way to linguistically honor student backgrounds, its capacity to honor students includes extra-linguistic dimensions. Teaching in New York City, Frank's students take the Regents Examinations. The Regents purport to test student achievement and the quality of instruction as aligned with New York State's learning standards. Though many states administer standardized tests, the Regents play an outsized role in New York school evaluations and serve as a graduation requirement. The test is often a major stressor for student and teacher alike. On the day before his students took the Regents, Frank chose to read them Mary Oliver's "I Worried:"[24]

I Worried

I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the rivers

flow in the right direction, will the earth turn

as it was taught, and if not how shall

I correct it?

Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven,

can I do better?

Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrows

can do it and I am, well,

hopeless.

Is my eyesight fading or am I just imagining it,

am I going to get rheumatism,

lockjaw, dementia?

Finally, I saw that worrying had come to nothing.

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And gave it up. And took my old body

and went out into the morning,

and sang.

Frank justifies opening his class with this poem because his students “were all very anxious” about the impending test and he hoped to calm them. They asked if they had to pass the first time. We recall Oliver’s line, “Can I do better?” Though he was unsure if they received “I Worried” as the potential life line it might have been, Frank describes the conversation his class had after reading the poem:

> So we just talked about that, the Regents—this is the first time you guys are taking it. You guys are non-native English speakers. I know you guys have these high expectations of yourselves, as you should, but at the same time, this test is hard even for people who grew up here. This test is hard for native English speakers. So please don’t be so hard on yourselves. This is not the first time you’ll take it. So that was something that I just had to make explicit like if it didn’t get through the poem, at least we got to talk about it, you know. So I got to hear about their anxieties.

Frank was able to build on the poem’s communication of the possibly unending and often futile nature of worry through the piling up of hypothetical fears to open up a dialogue about the current anxieties of his students. Frank’s appreciation for poetry has reflexively shaped his capacities as a teacher; when his teachers were anxious, he intuitively turned to a poem.

Good teaching of poetry does not always look like our conventional conceptions of it, consisting of annotation, explication, and occasionally student composition. Sometimes good teaching of poetry looks like translation for multilingual students or reading a poem about how worry comes

to nothing to a stressed-out classroom the day before a weighty standardized test. Frank goes further to outline poetry's malleability as advantageous for the classroom:

> Sometimes, just not even unpacking it, just having them read it. Sit with it. Read it one more time. Or read it altogether and we just kind of sit with it. We don't even have to say the meaning unless one kid is like, 'Well, what does this mean?' And then we can go into it. But if they just want to read it, sit with it, that's also cool. I want them to create, ideally, but maybe something short, you know, haikus, or like, just one stanza, like maybe even just finish this poem for me, change the ending of the poem, change the beginning something like that. Just have them think and really engage with it, and then they can make it theirs. So I think if the process is a little more creative, it's if it's a little more fun for them, for if they can bring themselves into it. I think there'll be a little more buy-in, rather than just me being like, Hey! I love poetry, you guys should, too!

The know-how here is that poetry is a flexible form, pedagogically fecund. The teacher of poetry who participates in it as a practice understands that poetry is meant for connection, sometimes for silence, sometimes for discussion, for creativity, and for meeting students where they are in ways other than just matching lexile levels.

Pairing poetry with other texts. That poetry need not be studied as a discrete "poetry unit," alone or in isolation from the rest of the forms in the English teacher's quiver, follows the previous idea that poetry offers the teacher a more flexible medium than often conceived. Maeve's predominant expression of her poetry practice does not isolate poetry from novels, short stories, and non-fiction essays. She intentionally weaves poetry throughout her ELA units, integrating it as a text pairing with novels and essays. She describes her freshman classes reading *The Sun is Also a Star* by Nicola Yoon (2016), pairing it with Emily Dickinson's "Hope' is the

thing with feathers" (1891) and Shakespearian sonnets to look at form, function, and lyricism. For her junior classes, she pairs Jason Reynolds' spoken word poem "For Everyone" (2020) with F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) to discuss the American dream. Such pairings echo the contemporary thread of poetry as aesthetic dialogue from Chapter 1, underscoring that to teach poetry is also to put it in conversation with other forms of literature and to consider the discrete affordances of the poetic form in such comparisons. Maeve's fluency in the form means that she easily sees the ways in which poetry can accent and deepen other corners of her ELA curriculum.

Balancing teacher enthusiasm and student autonomy. Competence in poetry often comes after scaling a higher, more technical threshold than required by other literary forms. Thus, teaching poetry involves scaffolding and disciplinary literacy, dimensions of the form we will consider in Schatzki's second element of practice. Despite the buttressing necessary for full participation, the poetry teacher must bear a sense of when their know-how of the form is required and when it is best to allow students to have their own poetry reading and writing experiences. Frank reflects on this, telling of a time when he did "all of the heavy lifting of thinking" out of an uncertainty as to whether or not "they were into it or getting it." Rather than doing the interpretive work for students or positing one particular way of reading the poem, Frank resolves that it is better to "give them more space with the poem." Though knowing when to release matters, the poetry teacher wants to give the student a sense of exploration, the satisfaction of gestalt comprehension, and the joy of finding their own way through the poem and into resonance. Only in having experience working through poems himself, struggling and stretching for their meaning, has Frank come to see the ways in which students might be either hindered or helped by his guiding hand.

Looking for gestalt opportunities. The final *doing* in this non-exhaustive list of ways teachers work with poetry pertains to meaning-making and the teacherly know-how required. We return to Zwicky's notion of gestalts. Maeve, describing her practices with poetry, takes a detour to share a conversation she had with a co-worker over lunch the previous week where she wondered about which element of gestalt comprehension—the part or the whole—to direct her students' attention to first:

> I feel like with poetry, I go back and forth of going top down, or building-block up. If that makes sense? Starting with a big picture meaning, and then picking apart how you got there. Or starting with looking at small things and giving students the tools or things to look for, and then building up. […] And I think it maybe kind of goes back and forth depending on the poem also. Because in some poems you can get the literal more quickly, and then it's fun to look at what they're doing with language. And some I think you kind of have to look at what they're doing with language in order to unpack the larger meaning.

Maeve has a sense here that good poetry involves that joy of making meaning, of seeing how the parts constitute a meaningful whole and how the whole transcends—*means*—more than its parts. Further, Maeve captures the way good poetry teaching involves helping students see the gestalt and that such a task sometimes requires different kinds of positioning toward the poem. Maeve's history of poetic interpretation, though, provides the substance for her reflections about the particularity of poems. Knowing when some poems are best approached "building-block up" or "top down" is not something that can be taught apart from a history of attempts to make sense of poems. Maeve's practical competency as a reader of poetry seeps into her pedagogical tactics.

In a conversation about sourcing more poetry to bring to his students, Frank asked about what he dubbed "cheap shot poems." In other words, Frank was looking for the kind of poems that do not demand an explanatory ticket to enter, poems that just make sense for students, or poems where the meaning is "just visceral." Trying to brainstorm beyond Rupi Kaur—the one poet for whom many students have a pre-existing and extra-curricular affinity—Frank echoes the *populist* sentiment: "I mean, there's no pretension behind the poetry that we're bringing in the class, right? We're not trying to get them into high art, or anything." Frank's own path to poetry—the early steps of which were lined with the figures of accessible poets like Mary Oliver—set the terms for the stencil outlining his own students' journey into the form. Knowing that teaching poetry is about getting students into the joy of making meaning, of seeing how language comes together to become more than the sum of its parts, means finding, often with an appeal to one's personal history with poetry, accessible entry points into the form.

2. Rules

In Schatzki's language, rules are those "explicit formulations, principles, precepts, and instructions that enjoin, direct or remonstrate people to perform specific actions" (Schatzki, 2002, p. 79). For Schatzki, rules are the script on which a practice runs. Rules link the doings and sayings of a practice insofar as "people, in carrying out those doings and sayings, take account of and adhere to the same rules" (p. 79). This is not to say that rules completely determine the ways practice is carried out; rather, rules are those scripts that actors—individual and collective—can take up to perform intelligible, coherent activity. Rules are codified within various cultural, material, and embodied phenomena. While Schatzki calls attention to the explicitness of rules, we might see other normative inertias in less than fully articulated ways. Take the example of the classroom poetry slam again. While earlier we noted that, for instance, choosing a poem suitable

for a slam event was a result of practical understanding, we are now in a position to see how these practical understandings are formed in relationship with rules governing them. The students and teacher alike know what kinds of poems to choose to read based on learning rules that both explicitly and implicitly guide the poetry slam. As such, the learning of these rules marks the students and teacher gearing into the *habitus*. To consider the teaching of poetry, I will look to both the articulated and subtly agreed upon rules governing engagement with the form. In terms of formal understanding, we must ask—how do poems work? What is a poem? What are the principles of reading a poem? What does reading a poem prompt the reader to do? Further, who ought to read poetry and what are the conditions—times, places, and dispositions—in which she can approach it? As the *doings* with poetry are largely safeguarded by the educational system, the teacher is the primary "rule maker" for student poetry practices. The teacher sets what poetry is in the world for her students. Throughout the interview conversations, we discussed these questions and considered how the formal elements of poetry inform teaching practices. I learn alongside the three teachers in how they choose to emphasize, de-emphasize, or otherwise work with the rules of poetry.

Esther, Maeve, and Frank aim to balance the role of poetry's formal elements in their poetry instruction. In our first conversation, Frank contended that instruction on poetic form would be a benefit to his students, "making sure there are ground rules first before then letting them loose." In our second conversation, he affirmed his decision—"I think a lot of my kids want that structure, they hate when I just [hands up], you know. So they want some sort of training. They want some guidelines at the very least." While poetry is made up of language students are familiar with, the conceptual arrangement and patterning of words on the page and the potential for abstracted or otherwise inventive uses of language demands a more technical

skillset. To try to encourage students to develop their competency in the rules of poetry—its formulations, principles, and precepts—so that they are able to perform the reading and writing of it, Frank posits learning incrementally. He specifies,

> Just starting simple, with a simple structure. And then counting syllables also, just doing haikus, iambic pentameter, or something else to help with their English acquisition. So I'm thinking, how many different avenues can we tackle with introducing poetry? The English levels are super varied throughout my classes so I had to find poems that aren't too alienating, in terms of looking too big, for example, or too scary. This is not to underestimate them either. I want to challenge them too.

Here, we see Frank's know-how in how he steps out of the gestalt and into the constitutive parts, thinking through familiarizing his students with smaller elements that contribute to what a poem is and how it works (not to mention while also simultaneously tending to his population's language acquisition). Poetry works, in part, due to manipulating and stylizing rhythm and meter in language. Rules of the craft involve a consciousness pertinent to syllabic structure and line length, stressed and unstressed syllables. Frank's desire to teach his students in increments, offering bite-sized units of poetic knowledge at their level, pays off. We can see how Frank balances expertise across the practices of teaching and poetry in such a way that highlights how a *formalist-populist* distinction fails to do adequate justice to how valenced his pedagogical approach is. As a result of such a textured balance, Frank is able to invite his students into participation in the practice of poetry. His awareness of their capacities for poetry digestion—rooted in his knowledge of them as his students—and his expertise in the craft allows Frank to offer a channel of "proximate development" (Vygotsky, 1978), a theme I will discuss in the remarks on apprenticeship in the section below. What is essential to see here is that the practices

of teaching and poetry are two colliding worlds of competency that are necessary for the successful and rich teaching of poetry. Teaching poetry itself can be seen as a practice that is the result of fluent and combinatory knowledge of the rules of teaching and poetry.

Esther similarly names poetry's demand for more scaffolding and front-loading from an instructional standpoint. She describes how she distributes "a full definition sheet of all the devices" that her class will potentially cover on the first day of any poetry unit or instruction, serving as an encyclopedic reference guide. Two of the foremost elements she emphasizes when working with poetry are "rhythm and structure." Esther says she "think[s] a lot about form and structure with poetry" in her teaching of reading and writing. In the former, she works to build a more robust concept of form to avoid how "a lot of them will just write a story and then hit enter and then just say, it looks like a poem." Esther expounds on what it looks like to try to nurture her students' proficiency with the poetry-specific features of language:

> So I think a lot about form and structure with poetry. I think they get caught up in the enjambment, the breaks, and not figuring out how stanzas are structured. I think once I get them to the idea of content, they can kind of get it. But what eludes them is the structure. It kind of messes them up. And then the second thing that I really focus on is symbolic interpretation. For some reason, if you do it in a short story, they kind of grasp it really easily. But then in poetry, it's over their heads. So I think a lot about how I need a lot more scaffolding for poetry. [...] It feels very jarring when I think about it. I always tell them to read it as if the form is not there because the form is messing you up. But then we have to go back and talk about form.

The back and forth that both Esther and Frank articulate reminds me of Maeve's conversation with her coworker about whether or not to begin her poetry reading with students by noticing

discrete parts or by considering the overall affect and whole. A "rule" for the practice of teaching poetry is the attendance to the principle of gestalt comprehension, acknowledging that poetry "works" through interrelated formal elements and the meaning the form vivifies. Esther refers to the meaning as the "content," favoring the act of looking first at the whole prior to zeroing in on the parts of poetry's genre-specific techniques. Such techniques do not play nearly as large a role (or hurdle, rather) in the reading of other literary forms. Whatever the pedagogical position, the gestalt precept for meaning-making directs the teacher of poetry's practices and drives their ways of approaching the act of guiding student perceptions of a poem—ways that cannot be so easily sorted into either the prioritization of form as a sacrosanct art a la *formalism* or the *populist's* rejection of it.

As a means to rewrite some of the students' misconstrued poetry perceptions, Esther tries to provide relatable language to the parts and wholes of poetry. When choosing poetry for her class, Esther works to locate poems "that are more story-based first, because they're more accessible." Further, she discusses how she tells students that "poems *are* stories" to encourage students to leverage the legibility of a form they are far more familiar with in narratives and novels, and because such a framing gives students a new purpose for their reading. Similarly, Esther builds her students' poetry stamina through the inclusion of song lyrics before segueing into spoken word poetry. Focusing on rhyme, rhythm, wordplay, and "the musicality of both song and word," her throughline stresses that poetry, as a form, is meant to be heard. Like in music, "in poetry the rhythm is consciously employed" (Andrews, 1991, p. 35). We might recall the contemporary thread of poetry as performance from Chapter 1 as part of how poems work. A teacher might ask, *how do the words in this poem do what instruments do in music?* If the teacher is the primary "rule maker" for student poetry experiences, part of her practice involves

reframing poetry in ways that build a textured coherence to the form as more than words on the page. For instance, here, the student might grasp how poetry is like a novel in that it might carry a story but also how poetry is like a song in its lyricism or (potential) sonic richness. Though a poem is more than the sum of these comparisons, the naming of such explicit principles helps the student carve out a distinct conceptual space for poetry as a genre.

A theme that has come out in these conversations is that a rule for the teaching of poetry has to do with how the eye is trained. Both Maeve and Esther drew our attention to the way poetry can be perceived in part or in whole. Trying to understand the meaningfulness of the poem is distinct but not separate from understanding its particular pieces. The eye to notice the whole, to see the gestalt of the faces or the vase, is an eye trained to flit between significations. As students dialectically oscillate between comprehension of the poem's meaning and an awareness of the formal elements atop which that meaning emerges, their eye travels into a deeper vision of what the poem is and holds. Expertise in understanding a poem is central in the teaching of this skill; yet deep competencies in teaching itself are required to offer students paths by which they may walk into practical competency in poetry themselves.

3. Teleo-Affective Structure

In addition to the practical understanding needed by practitioners and the rules acting as scripts for these practices, Schatzki identifies the general shape of practices as largely determined by "teleo-affective structure," "a range of normativized and hierarchically ordered ends, projects and tasks, to varying degrees allied with normativized emotions and even mood" (Schatzki, 2002, p. 80). Here, the goals at which a practice is pointed provide an outline for the routes which the practice can take to achieve these goals. Since there exists an indefinite range of doings and sayings that might hang together to make a practice, the practice itself gives shape to

what kinds of doings and sayings make sense. Schatzki writes, “a practice always exhibits a set of ends that participants should or may pursue, a range of projects that they should or may carry out for the sake of these ends, and a selection of tasks that they should or may perform for the sake of those projects” (p. 80). The oughtness, here, comes by way of the practice’s teleo-affective structure. Getting clear on the telos, the end or purpose, of a practice means seeing what would be involved in achieving those ends. More than this, Schatzki sees affect as central to thinking about ends. The kinds of affects and moods appropriate for one practice, or one step of a practice, might not be appropriate elsewhere. Further, the goals of practices themselves are entangled in affect. In sum, to speak of the practical and affective ends at which the practice is pointed is to lay out the rubric for the “project and tasks,” “emotions and even mood[s]” the practice ought to pursue, take up, and cultivate. This structure gives a general shape to the doings and sayings that make up the practice, imbuing the practice itself with not just ends but a form.

Poetry’s “ends” are not so simply quantified the way other classroom disciplines might be. Despite being difficult to pin down, we need to ask, what do teachers see as the ends of poetry? What are the goals they have for their students? What does ‘good’ reading or writing look like? What kinds of affect or mood do classroom practices aim for? If the students are exposed to the doing of a slam poetry session once a month, the affective structure of that practice differs from one wherein the teacher reads a meditative poem to start class each day. Such doings result in and are the result of different moods and point towards different ends, but what unites them is a participation in the practice of poetry. Like any practice, the practice of teaching poetry is structured by a general teleo-affective form. The outlines of rules and the practical understandings involved in both teaching poetry and poetry itself are made more sharply seen within the contours of this structure. Working in tandem, these three phenomena of

practice affect and are affected by one another, causally entangled. The structure, in other words, both shapes and is shaped by the results of practical understanding and rules.

We might imagine the doings and sayings involved in our classroom slam poetry session. While we have seen above that participation in such an iteration of practice requires practical understanding from its participants and the existence and acknowledgment of rules governing it, with Schatzki's third feature of what unites sayings and doings, we see that practices exist against the backdrop of a larger structure of ends and feelings. Students and teachers participating in the slam event come to know how to respond to each other's poetry and the rules governing what kind of writing makes for successful slam poems against the background of some larger structure of the ends and feelings at which such actions are pointed and with which they operate. While this knowledge is not always explicit at the student level, teaching poetry means a thoughtful awareness of this structure. Teachers of poetry should ask themselves—what do we want our students to experience? What do we want them to feel? What do we hope to nurture in our studying?

In our conversations, teachers emphasized the goal of providing the kind of classroom space where students have the opportunity to build a more positive relationship with poetry. Beyond hoping to ameliorate student resistance to poetry, teachers also cited their "ends" having to do with increasing student access to poetry, sharing joyful poetry experiences, platforming personal expression, leveraging poetry as a site for human connection, and nurturing a general classroom disposition.

Frank puts it unambiguously, "Prioritization for me in poetry is first getting them through the hurdle of, 'Oh, I hate poetry.'" Also deploying the same word "hate" as the antithesis of her goal, Esther describes her task this way: "I made it my goal to make sure poetry wasn't

something that they hated. It took a lot of intentional thought. I would only choose poems that I really loved, because if I love it, then I can get the kids to love it." In her intended end of helping students not hate poetry, Esther also names other ends—connecting with her students and getting to share a text that she loves. Others make similar moves as it seems considering the telos of classroom practices often strikes a personal chord. Frank answers the question of ends this way,

> Growing up, poetry in my classes was really frustrating. It felt like intentionally obfuscating details for a literary challenge rather than just pure enjoyment of the art form of words, of expression. And so I want … as a teacher, I realize the need for that as well—is there a happy medium? Or, some days I lean more towards one thing and other days really try to challenge my kids. In the end, I don't want my poetry lessons to push people away from poetry.

One of the preeminent ends of teaching poetry involves an unteaching—trying to reacquaint students with the form and finding ways to garner their buy-in. Frank realizes this goal by positing poetry as the material of "universal human experiences, because poetry is really just tapping into humanity for the most part," citing the potential inclusion of love poetry or other potentially top-of-mind relatable experiences. Further, he wants to promote student poetry exploration, mirroring the way he came to love poetry, "I just want to have them explore just how I did." Part of the telos of the practice is that of fostering an openness to the form, an act that often requires the teacher to draw on their own formative experiences.

After the students step onto the carefully rolled out welcome mat, the next end in mind is for students to feel part of the poetry they read, for it to be accessible to them. Esther works to widen her students' access through the use of music: "I thought [music] was an easy access point for kids because song is poetry. They like music, so if they can get excited about music, they can

get excited about poetry." Working at a high school that specializes in the arts, Esther incorporates music and black-out poetry as two enticing inroads that work to meet her students' penchant for creativity while redrawing the boundaries of what students call poetry. With similar attention to his particular student population, Frank describes his classroom as 95% Spanish speaking and names the challenge working in two or more languages poses for poetry's potential accessibility. Reflecting on his work with the Roque Dalton translation exercise, Frank questions: "I'm thinking, how do I make poetry accessible to everyone? How do I make sure their backgrounds are honored in my examinations of worldwide poetry? While I have a background in speaking Spanish, I don't have a background in Arabic or Bengali."[25] Esther and Frank as examples, we can answer the question of how things ought to be with poetry in the classroom. First, it should welcome, not deter students. Then, in order for the teacher to realize that end, poetry instruction should flow from a deep knowledge of the students who will be reading and writing it.

Frank and Esther also share the goal of student expression and personal engagement. Frank discusses his desire to transition his class's recent focus on reading and responding to poetry to composition, expressing how he "really would like student expression. These kids have stories to tell and feelings to feel, right? I want them to receive an invitation to create because if something—a form—speaks to them, they should be able to engage in that form." Here, we can observe a sequencing that builds student knowledge of poetry, particularly of form, prior to composition. We can also note the language of invitation. Students have "stories to tell and feelings to feel" and the poetry teacher invites them to express themselves anew through poetic

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[25] For an excellent resource for multilingual poetry, see the LyrikLine website, featuring poems in 91 languages and in numerous translation combinations: https://www.lyrikline.org/en/home/

form, platforming their lived experiences. Poetry is revealed as a site for the ends of self-expression and affective play.

Esther, preparing for a poetry slam as the conclusion of her unit, prioritizes the "personal connection" she wants her students to foster with poetry as well as a competence in understanding what makes a poem a poem. "There's a lot to think about" with writing poetry, Esther tells me, contemplating how she will encourage her students to "write a poem that they, one, feel satisfied with enough and, two, that is actually a poem." In her definition of what actually constitutes a poem, we remember her language, "I think a lot of them will just write a story and hit enter and just say that it looks like a poem. I want to keep that from happening, but also have them be excited to write poetry." At our last meeting, she retells the story of her poetry slam, student after student lining up to share their poems so much so that they ran out of time. Competent student participation in the form as creators, coupled with the centering of student voice, are integrated ends for the practice of teaching poetry.

Among other ends mentioned—that students might see poetry as a means for human connection and appreciate it as a craft with language—all three teachers expressed the overarching goal of offering students a new slate on which they might re-engage poetry. Esther, Maeve, and Frank all expressed the initial hesitation they sense in their students towards poetry and, thus, the way they try to subvert such initial distaste. Maeve admits, "I have to kind of trick them into it. I really have to do a lot of backdoor 'Wait, you guys actually liked this!'" The "backdoor" approaches are not meant deceptively, but hopefully. Maeve likens it to how she approaches independent reading, communicating to her students that poetry itself is worthwhile and that her reading a poem to start class each day is a genuine, non-instrumental practice: "I feel the same way with independent reading. Like I actually just want you to read." The teacher

actually just wants her students to enjoy a poem before class starts. Esther describes this end as "appreciation." She hopes her students "find the joy in it," but also keeps a level head, telling them, "I realize maybe [poetry's] not your cup of tea, but I think there are things you can grasp from it that you'll take with you." The desired aim of poetry's teleo-affective structure, before and after formal competence, is that students might see poetry as itself—baggage-free—and, thus, be able to access its goods. A normative end of the practice is the notion that the poetry classroom ought to be a place of genuine encounters with literature wherein responses like personal resonance, appreciation, and joy flourish. We should note that the teleo-affcetive structure of teaching poetry in the contemporary educational landscape means the goal of overcoming a distrust of poetry. While the practice of poetry bears ends internal to its form, the context of teaching poetry does much to shape the hierarchy of ends that make up the teleo-affective structure of the practice.

While these teachers of poetry primarily focused on practical ends, i.e. getting kids to "not hate it," these remarks reveal a deeper appreciation for the ends of poetry itself. Many of the ends mentioned above have affective dimensions, yet Maeve spoke most directly to the way poetry fulfills its own good and engenders a specific mood. Reading a daily poem "does set the tone and that matters. If it didn't matter, we wouldn't put up stupid twinkle lights and turn on lamps, you know?" Maeve goes on to comment on how all of these minor classroom decisions matter to evoking the classroom environment she wants—one that has a softer glow, feels grounded, and is thus differentiated from other disciplines or ways of interacting with content. We can think of the harsh fluorescent panel lighting of the school and the role of poetry as akin to the teacher bringing in her own curated, incandescent light-bulb lamps and string lights.

4. General Understanding

Schatzki's fourth element, general understanding, pertains to participants in the community in question and their understanding of "their work and, thus, of themselves," expressed in the organization of temporal practices (2002, p. 86). Such organization of practice, Schatzki stresses, "describes the practice's frontiers" (p. 87). This fourth component articulates how the practitioner conceives of the teleo-affective structure of their doings and sayings, how the participants in the practice view what they do and who they are. Such general understanding is "expressed in the manner in which people carry out projects and tasks" (p. 86) of a practice. For example, doings and sayings might be carried out in fervent, friendly, steadfast, or fearful ways. This understanding, as expressed by kinds of performance, helps organize the practice and set the terms for future action. Let's again imagine the poetry slam. A classroom's enthusiastic participation in a previous iteration of the practice makes a similar kind of performance more legible and likely the next time. As such, a successful, vibrant classroom poetry slam also shapes the participants' conceptions of themselves as poets. Conversely, if the teacher and her students reluctantly carry out a poetry slam—never catching momentum and finding it all a bit too awkward for their taste—participants view themselves accordingly. We can hear a student comment, "That really wasn't for me" and feel others nodding along. General understanding expresses the teleological organization, rules, and *habitus* of a practice. General understandings imbue the practices with a certain kind of sense and a precedent for how future engagements in the practice will go. In the case of the poetry classroom, we might hope to nurture the kind of understanding that frames the doings and sayings as those that exist as part of a felt community.

In our exploration of the components of practice and the way we might understand the teaching of poetry through these components, we see that part of what distinguishes the practice

of the poetry teacher is her range. The poetry teacher's practice holds within it a constellation of action and, thus, does not engage poetry in isolation or interact with the form through limited and strict encounters. The practice integrates poetry as a dynamic and continual part of the classroom community; the teacher at work to continually broaden her students' conceptions of how poetry makes sense in (and outside of) its space, striving for multiplicity in the kinds of doings and sayings involved. The participants in the poetry classroom read, write, respond, mimic, meditate on, snap to, and otherwise engage in a range of activities that express their understanding of themselves as people for whom poetry is not estranged. As such, the poetry teacher works to promote the hanging together or doings and sayings that thereby exude practical understanding, adhere to certain rules, cohere in telos, and flourish in the participants' general understanding of themselves as *part of* the practice. The teacher sets different terms for future engagement with poetry for her students and for the continuation of her practice. Though such collective know-how takes time and might not reach universal acceptance, the practice of the poetry teacher has made way for a more active and ingrained sense of what to do with poetry. If "people do what makes sense for them to do" (Schatzki, 2002, p. 232), the poetry teacher as a practitioner has rendered poetry more intelligible for her students and initiated them into the space of knowing what to do. Poetry's internal goods, experienced and made more discernible, are worth journeying toward (Higgins, 2011). The work of the poetry teacher's practice is to create a space wherein teacher and student inhabit poetry as a way of being in the classroom, fostering a *habitus* that predisposes or otherwise nurtures a "tendency, propensity, or inclination" (Bourdieu, 1972, p. 214) to draw on poetry for any number of purposes. Such a *habitus* outlasts the tenure of a given school year, charting a possibly richer, more meaningful frontier for being.

4.4 Practice and Apprenticeship

Triangulating Higgins' distinction that teaching is itself a practice and Schatzki's four dimensions of practice with the conversations I shared with Maeve, Esther, and Frank, I have tried to offer the teaching of poetry as a distinct practice. Further, I have tried to sketch it as a practice primarily concerned with gestalt comprehension, wherein teacher and student grow in the ability to perceive meaning and nurture the aptitude to exercise a certain kind of practical knowledge. Zwicky tells us that practice is the answer to the question of how to become proficient in gestalt comprehension and that we ought to heed Aristotle's suggestion of "hang[ing] out with those known for excellence. Acquir[ing] some experience of how they go about their lives. Follow[ing] in their footsteps. Copy[ing] them" (Zwicky, 2020, p. 18), this inquiry ought to attend to the notion of apprenticeship. It is one thing to know that poetry traffics in the symbolic and the meaningful; it is another to know *how* and to know how to make such features apparent for students. Here, I turn to Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger as they explicitly bridge the theoretical work of practice theory with the work of education—the work of learning. Through a process they describe as "legitimate peripheral participation," or LPP, Lave and Wenger (1991) posit that learning is a situated, social activity wherein the learner participates as a novice in a larger community of practitioners, as an apprentice might. This participation includes engaging in the sociocultural practices of the community while working toward mastery of the necessary learning or trade or, otherwise, toward full participation in the community.

Lave and Wenger work out of what they see as an "absence of theorizing about the social world as it is implicated in the process of learning" (1991, p. 54) and a missed opportunity for scholarship to consider apprenticeship as a learning model beyond its pre-industrial historical

connotations. They revisit Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to better capture the social role of knowledge-in-practice in the learning process.

Often conceptualized as scaffolding—the idea that a teacher needs to provide support or assistance to their students until they can perform tasks without that support—ZPD stretches beyond the notion that learning might be accompanied by a series of supports that progress students toward a certain goal. ZPD also includes Vygotsky's (1978) idea that learning is inherently social. Learning embodies a social dimension, which means more than that education happens in a classroom with other people in it; instead, learning's sociality means that *communities* of practice are integral to our learning. Lave and Wenger's apprenticeship model builds on Vygotsky's work to underscore the importance of communities of practice: "If masters don't teach, they embody practice at its fullest in the community of practice. Becoming a 'member such as those' is an embodied telos too complex to be discussed in the narrower and simpler language of goals, tasks, and knowledge acquisition" (1991, p. 85). The ends of apprenticed learning are to become like the master; the fact that this telos is deeply "embodied" and lived out as a way of being means that articulations of ends are never fully reducible to the discussion of "goals, tasks, and knowledge acquisition." To be apprenticed is to model a way of life.

As such, learning involves true access to the work of a given field, or, in other words, the student and teacher alike find themselves welcomed into the craft as observers, participants, and creators—not just distant analyzers or memorizers. The embodied telos of an expert is best articulated in the holistic concept of practice and with an attention to the *doings*. As we practice, there is a "sense that your judgements are becoming truer" and that that sense "is part of the experience of being fully engaged in what you are doing; it is a feeling of joining a world that is

independent of yourself, with the help of another who is further along" (Crawford, 2009, p. 207). To master any craft, the teaching of poetry as our example, involves a decentering: seeing the self as a whole person acting in a world beyond the self, independent but welcoming of participation.[26] Such decentering acts as a kind of anti-solipsism, a sense that the self is enlarged by participating in something beyond itself.

Notions of mastery are likely to draw concerns centered on questions of power—a history of gate keeping the form might make us shirk from the application of a word like master. But what is important to see in the present view is that the source of power has shifted from practicing master to the way being practiced. Mastery here works as a term to denote a certain level of competence and knowledge of a practice to which one is beholden. Developing the mastery of a practice like poetry does not bar students from poetry-making, for example, and resign students to following the teacher's (or test's) directions to analyze for theme. The practice of the teaching of poetry, as described in the former sections of this chapter, does not center the teacher as ultimate authority but rather centers the *doing* of poetry and engaging its goods as a communal activity. Much like the principle of scaffolding, the teacher, further along in the practice, engages her students. Yet both teacher and student are working with something beyond themselves. If someone is a master of their craft, they are not granted power in the same sense that we think of exploitative power.[27] Instead, a master of their craft has authority, expertise, and wisdom—virtues of which they offer an apprentice—only via the authority of the practice itself.

[26] See Lave and Wenger (1991) p. 49 and p. 53.

[27] I do not intend to claim that all masters of practices or crafts have steered clear of weaponizing power dynamics. We know masters of practices have exploited their power. What I intend to argue here is that the master-apprentice relationship does not, by definition, involve power imbalances that coerce and control. Rather, the master-apprentice relationship exists as a means of authentic learning, learning by example and initiating another in the excellences of a given practice.

To further nuance the master-apprentice relationship at play in a community of practice, distinguishing it from corrupted power brokering, I return to MacIntyre:

> A practice involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods. To enter into a practice is to accept the authority of those standards and the inadequacy of my own performance as judged by them [...] Practices, of course, as I have just noticed, have a history: games, sciences and arts all have histories. Thus the standards are not themselves immune from criticism, but nonetheless we cannot be initiated into a practice without accepting the authority of the best standards realized so far. (2013, p. 190)

Instead of seating the authority with the mentor/master/teacher, MacIntyre situates authority in the practices themselves—their history and standards. We might remember similar logic in the oft-parroted writing cliché of needing to learn the rules before and in order to break them. Excellence in a craft like poetry might mean a depth of knowledge of assonance and consonance, meter and rhyme, or Romanticism and the haiku before it means Instagram poetry. Excellence in a craft like the teaching of poetry might mean navigating the historical tensions of *formalist* and *populist* approaches and cultivating a depth of knowledge of how to best make poetry's formal elements meaningful and non-threatening for students before it results in a lesson plan. The initiation into "best standards realized so far" might parallel the development of the student and teacher's own practices. Further, the realization of such standards positions the teacher as a "master" of the craft with particular authority, expertise, and wisdom to offer to her students as they journey together toward poetry's internal goods.[28] Crawford (2009) describes the relationship between teacher, student, and practice as "a kind of philosophic friendship, the sort

[28] Higgins, 2011, p. 56.

that is natural between teacher and student: a community of those who desire to know" (Crawford, 2009, pp. 176-177). Even as the teacher is likely further along in their mastery of the subject and its "best standards," that difference in position need not exclude the student from agential participation alongside the teacher in the practice. Both inhabit a desire to know.

Perhaps especially in the discipline of English Language Arts, a delicate and sometimes fraught tension exists between some potential definition of "best standards"—recall *formalist* poetry instruction and its Eurocentric baggage—and the practice of teacher and student as poets and members of a literary community. Practice is "never just a set of technical skills" (MacIntyre, 2013, p. 193), never *just* grasping poetry's formal elements. Instead, MacIntyre phrases practice as a relationship—an excerpt I return to from an earlier mention:

> To enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point. It is thus the achievement, and a *fortiori* the authority, of a tradition which I then confront and from which I have to learn. (p. 194, emphasis original)

The ELA classroom mantra might be akin to "Here is the discipline of English, its history, and its excellences; let's learn and participate together." If we want it to, the notion of an extant discipline and precedent for disciplinary excellence can serve as an invitation to participate rather than an exclusionary mechanism. Chris Higgins, building on MacIntyre's notion that distinctive goods exist internal to practices, writes that through participating inside of worlds of practice, practitioners learn what "is worthwhile to participate in, excellent to achieve, and admirable to become" (2011, p. 50). The invitation for teachers and students to participate in a discipline like English, like poetry, is to posit a notion about what is worthwhile, excellent, and

admirable. The invitation for an adult to participate in the practice of teaching also advances a view about what is worthy to spend the workday doing, caring about, and striving towards. Such participation of teacher and student sketches a vision for a good life.

Lave and Wenger's turn to apprenticeship and MacIntyre's notion of "initiation" highlight a necessary re-focusing of our attention back toward that which brings students and teachers closer to, not further from, engaged learning—in our case, to learning poetry. What would happen if teaching, learning, and poetry were understood in our classrooms as practice-based? If our learning spaces were after an embodied telos with a felt sense of membership to a larger community of disciplinary practice? If the teacher of poetry adopted the wisdom of the trades to better realize the ends and goods available in the practice? Embracing apprenticeship in this way frames the teacher's role as the one who is further along in the philosophic friendship and thus helps the students realize the goods internal to poetry, goods the teacher knows how best to access:

> [The master] does the same work as the apprentice, only better. He is able to explain what he does to the apprentice, because there are rational principles that govern it. Or he may explain little, and the learning proceeds by example and imitation. For the apprentice there is a progressive revelation of the reasonableness of the master's actions. He may not know why things have to be done a certain way at first, and have to take it on faith, but the rationale becomes apparent as he gains expertise. (Crawford, 2009, p. 159)

The student may not know why writing a poem requires more care and technical sophistication than writing a story and hitting enter. This is one of many possible examples of something that the student might not know at first but must trust that the teacher of poetry will make known—perhaps gaining rationale through explanation, example, or imitation. With the help and example

of the further-along teacher, community of a classroom of those desiring to know, extant excellences, and rules of the practice of poetry, the student learns through progressive revelation. I note here a shift in describing the practice of poetry and the practice of teaching poetry. Both are at play. First, the teacher, initiating her students into the practice of poetry as someone further along, points to poetry as the practice and teaching as *part of* that practice. Second, the teacher participates in the craft of *teaching* poetry, a practice that exists in relation to but is distinct from the practice of poetry itself, possessing its own sets of rules, telo-affective structures, and goods.

By emphasizing the mentor-apprentice dynamic of practice, I do not intend to limit learning to some top-down dyadic type of transfer or assimilation of knowledge from teacher to student, a la "banking education" (Freire, 1968). That there are excellences of a practice and that training to achieve such excellences is a worthwhile pursuit gives teacher and student something to *do* together, giving purpose and structure to the *doings* of a classroom. Engaging in a community of practice, as many of us have—either in our classrooms or otherwise—also involves an entangled co-construction of knowledge that engages people in their social contexts and opens participants up to the influence of one another. We might remember student teaching as a salient exemplification of an active, communal, and embodied mentor-apprentice relationship. Lave and Wenger consider the features of this kind of learning, the kind that "involves the whole person" as that which "implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities—it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person" (p. 53). Such language resonates with hooks' observation that education so often "denigrate[s] notions of wholeness" (1994, p. 26). Lave and Wenger limn two key features of practice useful for our purposes here: the shortcomings of understanding learning as merely the internalization of knowledge and the goal of holistic learning that dissolves traditional binaries.

It is widely accepted that learning is a process. Revision practices in the English classroom exemplify this. Yet, so often, learning is a process *by which* something else happens, a means to an end of some kind wherein the learning is concretized, graded, and moved on from:

> Conventional explanations view learning as a process by which a learner internalizes knowledge, whether 'discovered,' 'transmitted' from others, or 'experienced in interaction' with others. This focus on internalization does not just leave the nature of the learner, of the world, and of their relations unexplored; it can only reflect far-reaching assumptions concerning these issues. It establishes a sharp dichotomy between inside and outside, suggests that knowledge is largely cerebral, and takes the individual as the nonproblematic unit of analysis. Furthermore, learning as internalization is too easily construed as an unproblematic process of absorbing the given, as a matter of transmission and assimilation. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 47)

To conceive of learning as a process without a sharp dichotomy between inside and outside or of learning that suggests something other than the cerebral assimilation of knowledge is to consider its materiality and social features. What is the learner *doing*? How is that doing socially situated or co-constructive? Thought of as a social and material process—rather than primarily a cognitive one—learning is a participatory, situated practice imbued with negotiation and renegotiation of meaning wherein "understanding and experience are in constant interaction—indeed, are mutually constitutive" and the "notion of participation thus dissolves dichotomies between cerebral and embodied activity, between contemplation and involvement, between abstraction and experience" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, pp. 51-52). Suppose a student participates in the ELA classroom in ways both cerebral and embodied, both contemplative and involved, or both abstract and practical. What does her classroom look like? What are its doings and sayings?

What would it look like for the ELA student to truly *develop* toward and apprentice the writer's craft—to envision themselves as part of a literary community and as a contributing member, as an insider in the world of literature? Or, for our purposes, what would it look like for the ELA student to develop toward a life of literature—the kind of "embodied telos" of someone who participates with ease in the literary community? It seems this kind of learning cannot result from merely talking *about* or *around* literature but through welcome participation in a literary-rich community of practice. Such participation might mean actually writing poetry, taking up the craft as a practice like a true apprentice would if learning a trade. It means manifold other practices, too, many of which I have outlined in the previous "Practical Understanding" section—including but not limited to reading and writing poetry alongside students, making explicit the rules of the genre, and gradually revealing the know-how required to best access poetry's internal goods. On the whole, building an "embodied telos" means engaging in practices that encourage *habitus*, a "form of knowing in practice akin to the 'feel for the game' experienced in sport" (Nicolini, 2012, p. 55) that accounts for coherent, regular, and unconscious future application.

We often speak of our hopes for our students to turn to literature throughout their lives, to look to it for meaning, guidance, escape, and sustenance. Such hopes often feel high-minded in our educational climate, yet they bolster our teaching practice nonetheless, as they are visions of what is worthwhile, excellent, and "admirable to become" (Higgins, 2011, p. 50). The practice view helps us think about how to align mind/body/action and how to leverage a reconfiguring of *habitus* so that our classroom practices are the kinds that constitute, carry, express, and make possible the hoped-for disposition. This disposition, that of loving literature and of reading the

world and the word with thoughtfulness and empathy—where we hope students find wholeness and meaning—is a disposition the teacher simultaneously nurtures in herself.

4.5 The Practice of Teaching and the Institution of School

Before we close this exploration into the teaching of poetry as a practice, I want to note the institutional dimensions that come to bear on realizing poetry teaching in the way I have been describing it. Unlike the master-apprentice relationship or hanging out with those wiser than us in the public square, the kind of poetry teaching I am considering is that which happens within and is informed by its situatedness in the institution of the school. We cannot fully consider the potential of a classroom practice that realizes the goods internal to poetry and nurtures new horizons of gestalt intelligibility without also acknowledging its context.

Practice theorists discuss the formative role of institutions on practices. Particularly salient for our consideration is the paradoxical relationship practices have to institutions as we contemplate the viability of teaching poetry within the larger apparatus of the contemporary school. Higgins (2011) articulates this paradox in his assertion that "even though practices depend on institutions, institutions can exercise a corrupting influence on practices" (p. 75). We might immediately see how this could be the case with poetry instruction. It is something that happens because students and teachers gather together at school, yet it is stifled by the demands of and standard ways of operating in the school context. I find Matthew Crawford's description of such corruption salient for the English Language Arts classroom and the craft of teaching: "Craftsmanship means dwelling on a task for a long time and going deeply into it, because you want to get it right" (2009, p. 20). Getting it right with something like poetry, or literature more broadly, requires a slower, longer dwelling than afforded to the contemporary student, teacher, or

school. As such, the goods internal to the practices of poetry and of teaching poetry are too often usurped by other, more extrinsic concerns.

While I am interested in the particular way the institution of the school dampens poetry instruction, either by eliminating the presence of poetry altogether or flattening it to a device-finding exercise, we might find purchase in examining the larger educational context. Endemic to our age, Crawford (2000, p. 146) writes of "the technocratic/meritocratic view of education" that treats education instrumentally. Education in this view is "good for society and for getting ahead," but never approaches what it means to genuinely and capaciously educate (p. 146). We might think of the all-too-familiar reality that parents, teachers, and students alike place greater emphasis on metrics like grades instead of on learning. For the teacher in particular, this instrumental view muddles and shortchanges their ends. For instance, if a teacher's ends involve nurturing a life-long love for literature in her students, the competing end of preparing students to achieve on standardized tests might confuse her priorities. The former imposes itself on the latter, telling the teacher that true flourishing cannot happen for her students if they do not graduate and have the opportunity to earn a living. While I do not intend to falsely pin academic achievement against leading a richly meaningful life engaged with literature, that they might mutually encourage each other rings a bit too idealistic.

It seems pertinent to distinguish teaching from the institution of school as a means for thinking better about both. MacIntyre describes this difference and charts a line for how virtue serves as the antidote to capitulating to the influence of an institution:

> Practices must not be confused with institutions. Chess, physics and medicine are practices; chess clubs, laboratories, universities and hospitals are institutions. Institutions are characteristically and necessarily concerned with what I have called external goods.

> They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power and status as rewards. Nor could they do otherwise if they are to sustain not only themselves, but also the practices of which they are the bearers. For no practices can survive for any length of time unsustained by institutions. Indeed so intimate is the relationship of practices to institutions and consequently of the goods external to the goods internal to the practices in question that institutions and practices characteristically form a single causal order in which the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution, in which the cooperative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution. In this context the essential function of the virtues is clear. Without them, without justice, courage and truthfulness, practices could not resist the corrupting power of institutions. (MacIntyre, 2013, p. 194)

That our classroom practices survive because of the institution of the school and that they are vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of that same institution, resonate as realities of the work of formal teaching. In distinguishing between his example of chess and chess clubs, MacIntyre delineates the meaningful difference between practices and their institutions as the kind of good they prioritize. We might ask who is better at the game of chess or who loves it more, reaping access to its goods—the chess player or the chess club president? Further, as practices are concerned with internal—as opposed to external—goods, virtue functions as the primary defense for maintaining a certain practical orientation. Without virtue, practices are bound to capitulate.

While some might understand the notion of continuing to work within a system while also aiming to courageously maintain a practice counter to the goals of the system as

capitulating—"the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde, 2018)—both MacIntyre and Higgins nuance the fine line a practitioner might walk. This is not to discount the fear of institutional corruption but to consider the ways teachers and students might protect certain practices. First, MacIntyre, "For the ability of a practice to retain its integrity will depend on the way in which the virtues can be and are exercised in sustaining the institutional forms which are the social bearers of practice" (2013, p. 195). The institution contains the practice, is its social bearer, but that does not obviate the necessity for individuals to act with virtue to maintain the integrity of the practice. Frank prepares his students for the Regents exam and wants to for the significant weight placed on its scores, but he also reads them a Mary Oliver poem about needless worry. Esther and Maeve might keep their schools' "do now" and "bell ringer" routines, respectively, but replace them with the ritual of a poem. The goods here intermingle and might not always feel neatly discernible for the student, yet the virtue of engaging with poetry in decidedly welcoming and meaningful ways exists in the presence of external demands. In these examples, practices "coordinate with, but also protect themselves against, the institutions that house them," pointing to

> the further fact that a crucial subset of the excellences of character particular to a practice are the moral virtues instrumental in preserving the integrity of practices in a world of institutions. These moral virtues ensure that external goods do not get mistaken for internal goods. (Higgins, 2011, p. 73)

When contemplating the virtues particular to the practice of teaching that also work to sustain it as a practice, I think of Maeve's reflection that teaching nurtures a spirit of resourcefulness and the ability to capitalize on potential. I think of the self-awareness and self-lessness mentioned by Frank and Maeve, respectively. I think of Esther's sentiment that one of the teacher's virtues is

the taking of responsibility for how they treat the time of others. Further, I think of Zwicky's insight that working with poetry—teaching poetry—is the work of re-cognition and meaning-making. Across these various reflections, I note virtues like reverence, flexibility, commitment, humility, sincerity, courage, and perseverance. Such virtues preserve the integrity of each individual classroom practice in the world of the school and point to a degree of restored agency, even if minor.

Though the degree of influence sustains a steady imbalance, I do not think we should conceive of the practices and the virtues of practices as strictly passive recipients of the noxious power of the institution. Higgins writes, "A true practice is not entirely a world in itself but communicates with the rest of society. It has the power to teach all of us something new about what is worth striving for and about the forms of excellence" (2011, p. 55). Amidst the external goals of the school, poetry indicates that something else might be worth striving for. Bothering to practice the teaching of poetry—having students memorize life lines, spending a class period slowly combing through the language of a sonnet, or gathering on an April afternoon for a poetry slam—is not about upping the number of students in AP English courses. Teaching poetry has more to do with widening the number of students equipped to make meaning, perceive the world meaningfully, and go forward in life as people who turn to poetry in one way or another. Teaching poetry acts on the practitioner as well, decidedly forming the teacher in ways that sustain and deepen her know-how toward whatever in her classroom practice might be beautiful, human, and fulfilling. If practices communicate with the rest of society, then the teaching of poetry communicates a vital alternative to the instrumental, technocratic way of being so characteristic of educational institutions in ways both conscious and subliminal. It sets forth a new kind of *habitus*—pre-reflective, dispositional know-how—that renders new, possibly poetic

ways of doing and being intelligible. It also communicates a vital alternative to those inside said schooling institution—to those setting its terms—as a means of protest and, chiefly, to those working and learning inside of it, that they might define themselves with more meaningful and less metrical terms.

Caesura 4

The Teacher's Know How

Is demonstrating metrical Anapest
With a limerick whose feet
    (Sing it!) *da DUM da da DUM da da DUM*
Strike to Salman Rushdie's beat,
Assailing the Kardashians
    da da DUM da da DUM
Insults—but in reverse dactyl "fashian"[29]

Is knowing Rupi Kaur and Courtney Peppernell,
And their evocative immediacy, are not her enemies

Is matching up Marshall Davis Jones' "Touchscreen"
With Natasha Trooper's "Love Languages" to slam off
In Tuesday's March Madness poetry bracket

Is posing the sestina's[30] elegant musical precision
    Stanza one: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
    Stanza two: 6, 1, 5, 2, 4, 3
As a class period poem tug-of-war
Braiding the same six, voted-on end words
    Stanza three: 3, 6, 4, 1, 2, 5
    Stanza four: 5, 3, 2, 6, 1, 4
The final word shimmies to first position, highlighters out,
A chain infolding itself
    Stanza five: 4, 5, 1, 3, 6, 2
    Stanza six: 2, 4, 6, 5, 3, 1
    Envoi: 1, 2, 3, 4; 5, 6
Until the Provençal intricacy sounds like a teenage chorus
And the crescendoing ruckus down the hall is not because
Of Rudyard Kipling, Ezra Pound, Elizabeth Bishop, or Donalds Justice and Hall
But because of us.

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[29]Tweet series: Rushdie, S. [@SalmanRushdie]. (2011, November 1). 1. The marriage of poor kim #kardashian / was crushed like a kar in a krashian. [Post]. X. https://x.com/SalmanRushdie/status/131562382282588160?s=20

[30] Stanza frame as written out in Edward Hirsch's *The Essential Poet's Glossary* (2017, pp. 284-287)

Chapter 5: Education as the 'Most Sacred Part'[31] of Our Being: Ritual and Practice

> "It may be, however, that a general inability to conceive a better order of things can give rise to a resignation that paralyzes and prevents people from acting to bring about change. An accompanying ebbing of the sense of personal and communal efficacy may submerge people in the given, in what appears impervious to protest and discontent. To call for imaginative capacity is to work for the ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise."
>
> —Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination* (2000, pp. 18-19)

In the previous chapters' explorations of practice, I have considered teaching, poetry, and the teaching of poetry as distinct but intertwined practices. Approaching the teaching of poetry as a practice, I have argued, holds specific purchase for imagining "otherwise" as called for in Greene's excerpt above, especially as it pertains to its position inside of the institution of the school. A dimension of poetry teaching as an "otherwise" practice that I want to further consider is its propensity for incorporation of ritual. I want to reserve the category of ritual as a feature of the student experience and, therefore, as a *part* of the practice, not the practice itself. Though Catherine Bell, a religious studies scholar who specialized in ritual studies and wrote the classic *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (2009) differentiates ritual action from practice, taking issue with practice theory, she also describes practice as an "obvious place to start" (p. 74) when thinking about ritual. Bell builds on practice theory, as I do here, in order to stress "the primacy of the

[31] "Most sacred part of his being" language originates in Heinrich von Kleist's letter to Wilhelmine von Zenge on March 22, 1801 as cited by Nietzsche in "Schopenhauer as Educator" (1874/1994, p. 141).

social act itself" and ritualization as "a strategic way of acting" (p. 67). Ritual is a potential extension of practice, a strategic way of engaging in social practice in its doing-ness and emphasis on acting. Some teachers as practitioners of poetry teaching—Maeve, Esther, and Frank among them—institute rituals in their classrooms. All three teachers chose to institute the ritual of opening class with the reading of a daily poem, the same ritual I implemented in my classroom as my high school ELA teacher did before me. In the coming pages, I want to consider ritual as a broader, worthwhile category for thinking through poetry's formative role in the classroom.

To fully sketch why ritual is a vital component of the practice of teaching poetry, we have to pick up the thread from the former chapter regarding the environment in which the practice and its subsequent rituals take place. Its institutional interest in external goods notwithstanding, school environments cannot help but reflect their wider culture. Ours is a culture wherein neoliberal capital has colonized the social sphere—distancing personal connection and relocating the site of human connection to solitary online experiences, engaging in personalized, corporately funded algorithms. In the 2023 report "On Edge: Understanding and Preventing Young Adults' Mental Health Challenges" at Harvard Graduate School of Education's Making Caring Common Project, Richard Weissbourd et al. describe the deleterious effects of the kind of environment our young people find themselves in: "Far too many young adults report that they feel on edge, lonely, unmoored, directionless, and that they worry about financial security. Many are 'achieving to achieve' and find little meaning in either school or work" (p. 2). Unmoored, directionless, and without meaning—that such words describe children is cause for serious concern. Though the Making Caring Common Project report offers an extensive list of resources, I want to consider this issue philosophically by first engaging with the

philosophy of education, reading Friedrich Nietzsche's critiques of the intellectual life of his own German society in "Schopenhauer as Educator" in dialogue with bell hooks' feminist critical pedagogy in *Teaching to Transgress*. I will sketch an argument for the importance of corporal, mental, and spiritual wholeness in transcending a picture of learning as the mere transmission and storage of information, the kind of impersonal "banking education" (Freire, 2000) method so common to our schools. Then, I will draw from the field of ritual studies and conversations with Frank, Maeve, and Esther in order to ground the "how," the practice, of such an engaged pedagogy—eventually to make the case for ritual as a fecund dimension of the practice of poetry teaching.

5.1 To be Untimely and Engaged Pedagogues: Nietzsche and hooks on Embodiment and Spirituality

When Friedrich Nietzsche looked at the German culture of his day, he was disgusted with how "completely" unphilosophical it was. This was not a frustration over a lack of intellectual potential; he would not have contested that Germany excelled in calculative endeavors like economics and the natural sciences. What he saw around him was a spiritless world. This famous thinker of the death of God, ironically, wanted a little soul. Nietzsche was troubled by the "triumphant Prussian leviathan, along with the educational reform initiatives it was adopting with unprecedented enthusiasm" (Jonas & Yacek, 2018, p. 1). Germany's rapid modernization left Nietzsche to describe his age as that wherein "all moral energy [was] at such a low ebb" (1874/1997, p. 132). While the context in which I write has changed, such symptoms perhaps have not abated in the following centuries; Nietzsche's antidote might pair with another to better attune to our own postmodern, neoliberal moment. bell hooks joins Nietzsche in thinking through the ways in which modern life objectifies the educational process, robbing it of spirit and

meaning. Together, Nietzsche and hooks help us recognize the way that "our ability to recognize and therefore acknowledge" gestalt thinking and insight "has been eroded by the ideal of mechanization" and that "the rise of mechanization has not made meaning easier to apprehend" (Zwicky, 2020, p. 21). I remember Berry again,

> Your mind will be punched in a card
> and shut away in a little drawer.
> When they want you to buy something
> they will call you. When they want you
> to die for profit they will let you know

Together, Nietzsche and hooks help us consider the oft-neglected places of embodiment and spirituality in education and provide resources for thinking beyond utilitarian conceptions of learning that fixate on quantification, calculative logic, and the mind as a disembodied entity.

Like thinkers more closely associated with pedagogy such as John Dewey, Nietzsche and hooks share a vision of the centrality of education in social life. Seeing the indissoluble, co-constitutive relationship between social life on the whole and the educational apparatus of a given social body means refusing to answer the question of the chicken or the egg. Schools produce the citizens that make up the social body who then go on to form the schools. Caught in a loop, John Dewey (1916) collapsed these two into one when he spoke of education as analogous to life itself. If this tight affinity is correct, then so too might be Louis Althusser's assessment of schools as the most dominant of the "ideological state apparatuses" (1971), reproducing the relations of capitalist production.[32] One need not agree with Althusser's political

[32] For a more in-depth consideration of Althusser, education, and the concept of the school as an "ideological state apparatus"—usurping religion, media, or political parties as the most effective site for ideological formation—turn to *Althusser and Education: Reassessing Critical Education* (2022) by David I. Becker.

conclusions to observe the veracity of this idea. Educational systems are the central conduit of subject and social formation in the contemporary world. The *kinds* of subjects formed are then dependent on the judgments and prescriptions of the social body—or at least its powerful members, wielding sway over what we learn and, thus, how we are formed through what we learn.[33] While both Nietzsche and hooks vividly see ways this subject formation has led to problems, hooks' analysis is more trenchant insofar as she illuminates how this particular formation proliferates and is proliferated by domination. Both see the centrality of education, offer "untimely" critiques that rebuff the dominant logic of their respective cultural milieus, and propose a particularly lucid and prophetic reading of contemporary education.

Much like I am considering in our current moment, Nietzsche and hooks both identify the problem with contemporary life and education in a spiritual register. For them, and I venture for us, something arid and cold has blown through the world. To address the broader question of alienation and domination demands a closer look at the ways in which a given educational system reproduces these problems. Nietzsche introduces Schopenhauer as the exemplary educator, opposing him to the disdainful "sham" educators in his day who only promised pseudo-leadership. University professors, for Nietzsche, represent a "cold," arid, self-interested, and "vivisectionist" (1874/1997, p. 171) approach to truth, seeing it as something utilitarian and profitable. Instead, Schopenhauer's example is one of a "visible philosophical life" with a demonstrative depth observable in "his outward life and not merely in his books—in the way, that is, in which the philosophers of Greece taught, through their bearing, what they wore and ate, and their morals, rather than by what they said, let alone by what they wrote" (p. 137).

[33] To underscore the contemporary pitch of such a power dynamic in the United States, one need not look further than recent resistance and restructuring of Advanced Placement (and otherwise) curricula regarding slavery and civil rights. See recent *New Yorker* article, "The College Board Strips Down Its A.P. Curriculum for African American Studies" (2023) by Anemona Hartocollis and Eliza Fawcett.

Looking at his nineteenth-century German context, Nietzsche diagnoses the parallel problems of an utterly *un*philosophical society and of a similarly hollowed-out university education devoid of any fortitude. He aims to "educate *against* his age" (p. 146, emphasis original), striving for coherence between belief and action. Nietzsche posits that his culture has lost its "religious mode of thinking" and put in its place "not even optimism but journalism," which he deems "spiritless" (p. 147). Nietzsche sees this arid existence wherever he looks within German society; the educational system's penchant for reproducing this mode of existence is particularly troubling. Philosophers of education, Mark E. Jonas and Douglas W. Yacek, describe Nietzsche's view that "modernity has a profound leveling effect on the moral imagination" and how "we have difficulty articulating an account of the good life in terms other than wealth, civic responsibility, 'sociability' and the accruement of scientific knowledge" (2018, p. 10). Nietzsche asks, "Who is there then, amidst these dangers of our era, to guard and champion *humanity*, the inviolable sacred treasure gradually accumulated by the most various races?" (1874/1997, p. 11, emphasis original). Who will redefine what it is to live a good life? How can we escape the loop of mutual degradation between culture and education when the next generation is acculturated into this way of being? We might have similar questions for a STEM-obsessed world governed by standardized testing.

More than a century later, hooks similarly decries the culture in which she finds herself situated. While bearing a frustration not entirely dissimilar to Nietzsche's view of nineteenth-century German life, hooks is not merely concerned with lifeless malaise but rampant domination. A teenager during the Civil Rights Movement and the racial desegregation of schools, hooks is all too familiar with the ways in which life can be not just dull but hellish. Deeply attuned to the existential and intersectional dimensions of her social world, hooks often

grapples with the “politics of heterosexism within a white supremacist patriarchy” (1994, p. 96) and the silence on class in America (p. 177). Beyond this framing, what makes hooks’ thinking so compelling is that she clearly sees the spiritlessness that Nietzsche observed in his own context, but she goes a step further. She writes of inflexible systems of education reinforcing systems of domination, enacting “rituals of control” (p. 5) while prioritizing information divorced from any bearing on lived experience. Her theory grounds domination *in* a certain calculated lifelessness; she reveals the dark underside to an arid experience of the world. hooks’ theoretical project in education is grounded in the work of Paulo Freire. She posits a detailed account of the ways in which the systemic apparatus of education maims both teacher and student. In Freire’s terms, “banking education” is ideologically and practically regnant in many educational settings around the world. This view of the student is degradingly passive. The job of the student is merely one of “storing the deposits entrusted to them” (Freire, 2000, p. 73). Delivered in the same existential key as Nietzsche’s frustration with the pedagogy of his own age, contemporary education systems might be simply producing the same kinds of students as the vigorless savants and unthinking intellectuals of Nietzsche’s day.

hooks’ intersectional framework allows her to develop capacious critiques of how her own experience in these systems had formed her. She writes of her student experience in higher education classrooms that “it was difficult to maintain fidelity to the idea of the intellectual as someone who sought to be whole” (1994, p. 16). She observes the absence of an emphasis on “spiritual well-being, on care of the soul” in her education and how often the system worked as an objectifying and compartmentalizing force dedicated to “denigrate notions of wholeness” (p. 26). hooks was frustrated with pedagogical theories and methods that prioritized the acquisition of detachable knowledge as if a Cartesian duality accurately described the complexities of being.

This approach undermined the pursuit of human flourishing and rendered the "whole," integrated person an impossibility within the classroom. Similarly, Nietzsche sketches—by negation and his incisive snubbing of Kant—the vocabulary of possibilities for what education might be: life-transforming, alive, revolutionary, and spiritual in some totalizing sense. Nietzsche's diagnosis of a sterile, flattened existence pairs with hooks' diagnosis of a denigrated, splintering, and inhospitable education; mining his Greek, prescriptive advice, we might find robust resources for an authentic, spirited, and embodied form of life and education.

hooks' solutions focus on a collective reorientation. hooks' conception of "engaged" and "counter-hegemonic" pedagogy (1994, p. 2) strives to reintegrate and heal what was (and remains) torn asunder. From her standpoint as a critical feminist pedagogue, she discusses the importance of passion and eros in the classroom—that they need not "be denied for learning to take place" (p. 193). She argues that the classroom is not about the disembodied transmission of facts but about a fullness of *living*. To hooks, the classroom is "the real world"[34] in the sense that the kind of thinking and feeling we do in the classroom has a direct bearing on and "should inform our habits of being and ways of living outside of the classroom" (p. 194). Embracing the classroom as a holistic space is a process of undoing the reduction of knowledge to its use value and education to the acquisition of epistemological units of utility. It is a liberatory process for teacher and student as it frees the body and spirit, inviting the whole person to invigorate the space of the classroom with a "union of mind, body and spirit" (p. 18). In an educational climate of high-stakes testing, funding cuts to arts-based programs, Google Scholar citation statistics, the quantification of target-based learning, and the reign of STEM, "learning" becomes a post-

[34] Teachers often scold students, reinforcing power hierarchies, with the all-too-familiar refrain that "you can't do that out in the real world." Instead of this demeaning threat, teachers ought to consider the ways in which what we do in the classroom *is* in fact a part of and happening in the "real world" for teacher and student.

industrial mechanism for efficiency and productivity. This conception of learning is inseparable from the broader culture's distaste for gestalt comprehension, for perceiving things as more than their parts or more than their instrumental value. I hear an echo of Nietzsche and hooks in Zwicky's (2020) words, describing our culture as a "technocracy," that is

> defined not by the quantity of its gadgets but by its refusal to regard gestalt comprehension as legitimate. In such a culture, the arts are thought of as entertainments; visual thinking in mathematics and the sciences is derogated; indigenous wisdom is dismissed as superstition; moral issues are treated as problems in cost-benefit analysis; the purpose of education is to get a job. (p. 57)

Moral energy seems indeed at a low ebb and education the place where we reap the splintered nature of what we sow.

hooks counters this with a vision of engaged pedagogy, rejecting the notion that learning might ever be meaningful as a rote, transactional, and disembodied process. Engaged pedagogy seeks transcendence and transformation. Engaged pedagogy pushes past dualistic boundaries and is, thus, transgressive. Seeking transformation *is* the transgression. And transgressing boundaries—daring to remember the humanity of each person in the classroom space and the extant potentiality present in the collective, whole self—is pleasurable. Such a notion is not unlike Zwicky's (2019) insight that the experience of meaning—of experiencing gestalt comprehension where one can see and feel the whole of something—is gratifying. Learning in a community is joyful in its possibility, electric because it is interdependently agential.

And while this kind of radical classroom space is pleasurable, it is also taxing and near-impossible work. It is truly "untimely," often unsupported, misperceived as strangely experimental, or made impossible by impositions of state standards and looming standardized

tests. And yet. This kind of untimely, engaged, critical feminist pedagogy "comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred" (hooks, 1994, p. 13). That is to say, it can come to those of us who believe that what we do in our allotted bell scheduled time has something to do with nurturing the "intellectual and spiritual growth of our students" (p. 13), something to do with respecting and tending to their full selves.

To be untimely is to notice that "the world has never been more worldly, never poorer in love and goodness" (Nietzsche, 1874/1997, p. 148), never freed itself of its severing systems of oppression and force, never after an education daring enough to be "wholehearted" (hooks, 1994, p. 193) nor concerned with the "lessons set [to us] by existence" (Nietzsche, 1874/1997, p. 155). hooks writes that it requires a "profound commitment to engaged pedagogy" and that embodying this level of responsibility is "taxing to the spirit" (hooks, 1994, p. 202). Many teachers—worn thin by the pressures of today's politically volatile, all-consuming, and metrics-driven education system—would be right in rebutting that there is nowhere left to pull from, no way to possibly *care* more. To love in this way, to work without recognition for the betterment, humanization, and self-actualization of students, is to do something that will not compute and is to tap into virtue as a means of resistance. It is transgressive. To love, to imagine and enact, to be farsighted and cast hopes into the future, is to choose to educate against the age and to resist the severing of mind/body, education/society. *Believing* that all students—all people—deserve the pleasure it is to know, learn, make meaning, and experience themselves as agents in rendering our world more whole is the work of liberation. I will now turn to some conceptions of poetry teaching practice that center ritual as a way to figure the *how* of such work—a way of doing, practicing.

5.2 Ritual as Part of Such Practice: Catherine Bell and Byung-Chul Han

In a similar vein to hooks and Nietzsche's critiques, philosopher Byung-Chul Han in *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present* describes contemporary social life as suffering from an "erosion of community" (2020, p. iv). Han argues that the disappearance of ritual in contemporary social life is a deep deprivation and, further, posits that the forces of production and technology have created a milieu of frenetic restlessness, shallow attention, and insatiable consumption. Such language might as well also describe the contemporary institution of school. I want to argue that the category of ritual remedies the problem of the uninhabitable school environment, working to "educate *against* [our] age" (Nietzsche, 1874/1997, p. 146, emphasis original). Ritual might be a central concept for imagining and enacting transcendence-seeking, transformational, and "counter-hegemonic" pedagogy (hooks, 1994, p. 2). Catherine Bell (2009), reads ritual in Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, showing us how ritual can create a set-apart, sacrality of space: ritual activities can "effectively sacralize things, people, or events" (p. 15). While the restorative potential of ritual includes communal bonding and the reintegration of mind and body, it also has the potential to infuse our sterile, compartmentalized bell-schedule with purpose, value, and a sense of the sacred. And while ritual studies typically pertain to sites other than the school, ritual as a category and ritualization as a strategy aid in furthering "the possibility of looking at things as if they could be otherwise" (Greene, 2000, 16). In other words, through the sacralizing, communal, and embodied practice of ritual, the contemporary classroom might find itself "otherwise" and, thus, in the business of perceiving gestalts.

Rather than debating the categorical boundaries of ritual, Bell (2000) posits a useful reframing—one where the "differentiation and purposes" of human activities and "the very doing of the act within the context of other ways of acting" clarifies what is or is not ritual (p. 74). In

fact, the juxtaposition of ritual with a broader context not only helps define it as a category, but also locates its importance. Bell describes this contrast quite powerfully,

> I will use the term 'ritualization' to draw attention to the way in which certain social actions strategically distinguish themselves in relation to other actions. In a very preliminary sense, ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities. As such, ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane,' and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors. (2000, p. 74)

With modern schooling in mind, a daily poetry ritual—for example—decidedly acts as a setting apart, qualitatively distinguishing itself from the rest of school. Privileging a moment to hear and read a poem, a moment to quiet, a moment wherein experience usurps the pressure to maximize bell-to-bell productivity, is not done out of context but in strategic comparison to its context. It educates against the age, a moment of counter-hegemonic pedagogy. I remember Maeve's reflection that we teach students what is worthwhile by how we spend the allotted 48 (or however many/too few) minutes. In short, it is equal parts rebellious and hospitable—staking a claim about what the classroom might actually be about (or not about) and rendering it more habitable.

As a potential feature of the classroom, the category of ritual offers a generative ground for observing practices as mechanisms for formation and connection. And while ritual is a contested category within the study of religion, I want to consider it as a quality of action rather than a singular practice in and of itself, a functional designation applicable to myriad practices.

“Repetition, patterning, and stylization” are among the predominant features of ritual, in addition to the formation of social bonds (Stephenson, 2015, pp. 19-20). Ritual is not quite habit, but a kind of pattern or style of behavior that is inclusive of or often formed through repetition. Ritual produces a communal sense of *habitus*, a practical know-how that marks its participants.

Thus, the kind of ritual I want to consider here is a set of practices that repeat; take patterned shape and style; prompt a reverent, reflective, or otherwise set apart presence; and allow for full participation by teachers and students alike. Further, I want to consider the kind of ritual Byung-Chul Han defines as that which renders time and space habitable:

> We can define rituals as *symbolic techniques of making oneself at home in the world.* They transform being-in-the-world into a *being-at-home*. They turn the world into a reliable place. They are to time what a home is to space: they render time *habitable*. They even make it *accessible*, like a house. (2020, p. 2, emphasis original)

If ritual presents the possibility for the classroom to achieve a being-at-home, a kind of hospitable and shared space that feels home-y in that it belongs to its inhabitants, then I want to consider it. I remember my student John’s words here—“It’s almost like you go home for a little bit” (Davis, 2023, p. 373)—to consider how rituals that engage literature, namely poetry, might particularly render the school space more habitable. Or, in Maeve and Esther’s words, more prayerful, reverent, and personal.

Ritual as practice serves students and teachers in many ways, among which is its ability to create and sustain a communal body. While some argue that rituals constitute the “basis of social life itself” (Goody, 1975, p. 36), others posit it as communication that enhances group cohesion (Huxley, 1966), “social glue” (Han, 2020, p. 47), or “the affirmation of communal unity in contrast to the frictions, constraints, and competitiveness of social life and organization”

(Durkheim, 1969 as cited in Bell, 2000, p. 21). While the school's calendar of assemblies, daily bell schedules, exam periods, spirit weeks, and the like enact some semblance of routine in their repetitive nature and goals of sustaining the culture of an organized social body, they are institutional practices. I am interested in the space of the classroom, contextualized in the broader school community, and the practices in which the "fictions, constraints, and competitiveness" of the institutional environment fade in favor of a warmer glow, that of increased community and belonging. For example, Ruth Vinz and Maya Pindyck write of the practice of sharing daily poetry invitations with their students—invitations for writing and seeing—that free students "to crack open their cautions and learned habits of logic" through ritual (2020, p. 98). Or, we might imagine a teacher who hosts a bi-weekly Friday poetry slam, tapping into the potential to equip both student and teacher with a shared, repetitive, and symbolic collective action through which the respective parties communicate and affirm their interdependent identities.

The category of ritual also presents an advantageous point of observation for the researcher interested in entangled, embodied realities that move beyond mind/body binaries. While differences exist amidst the multidisciplinary field of ritual studies and various methodological approaches, Bell (2009) describes a "surprising degree of consistency in the descriptions of ritual: ritual is a type of critical juncture wherein some pair of opposing social or cultural forces comes together" (p. 16). Examples of such a coming together, Bell further elaborates, "include the ritual integration of belief and behavior, tradition and change, order and chaos, the individual and the group, subjectivity and objectivity, nature and culture, the real and the imaginative ideal" (2009, p. 16). For our purposes, I mostly consider the ritual integration of the individual and the group. As a communal practice, ritual works to remedy what is often torn asunder by contemporary schooling, restoring a sense of collective belonging and purpose in the

midst of an individualistic, hyper-competitive, and instrumentalized environment. In other words, I am less interested in the institution's ritualized practices and more interested in the pedagogical rituals that happen in the classroom. Such pedagogical rituals often exist as co-creations of the teacher and her students—indicating a sense of agency, but also the presence of love.

Ritual or Routine?

Despite the religious connotations of the word, many educators use the term "ritual with ease," likely familiar with "rituals and routines" workshops and articles at the start of the academic school year. Though ritual and routine are often used in the same colloquial breath, intimating an interchangeability, distinguishing them grants us greater clarity on the category of ritual and why it is useful. When I asked Maeve and Esther about how they would demarcate the two terms, they spoke to the content of the action—the substance of the doing—as the distinguishing characteristic. Working out whether or not she would categorize beginning her classes with a poem as ritual or routine, Esther differentiates them by their substance:

> My initial thought would be that [the poetry opener] is a routine, because we still do "do now's," even outside of poetry. So it's like a routine-based thing. But I guess then the question is like, what would count as a ritual? [...] So this is kind of going back to a more personal experience. So I guess that's why I'm hesitating—because the content feels ritualistic in sharing opinions, like we even talked about today, how do you feel about poetry? What has your experience been like? So it's been very for-the-kid, but the timing of it still feels routine. So I guess the routine to me is more like the structure of how it's run. But the ritual nature is the content of what we're talking about.

I appreciate the way Esther kneads this definition out in real time. In this response, I see the way that routines make way for rituals, in the sense that they create space. A routine can simplify classroom procedures so that space exists for a moment of meditation or the reading of a poem. A ritual somehow breaks from the procedural and, though benefitted by routine, is not contained by it. Ritual is rich with a particular kind of set-apart content, be that for-the-kid personal or, as Maeve recounts it, reverent.

Considering similar, albeit slightly different, dimensions of content and form, Maeve delineates ritual and routine this way: "Routine feels like, alright, the slide is up, here's the agenda for today. That feels like a little bit less—I don't know—reverent? Where something about the poem sharing does feel kind of like—I'm trying to think—weirdly prayerful, or reflective." Routine houses the repetitive and the procedural, existing to help things move with smooth efficiency. Holy language—reverence, prayer, reflection—corresponds with ritual, which Maeve ties to her classroom's poetry sharing and juxtaposes against standard daily agenda procedures. The ritual happens in part because poems somehow animate the action. If there were not poetry, these start-of-class moments would just be routine. Such a delineation resonates with Bell's (2000) "qualitative distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane,'" ritual as that which privileges a set apart, transcendent quality that usurps mundanity.

In both responses, there seems a participatory nature to definitions of ritual. Routine is that which keeps the class on track and aware of its order of operations. Ritual is that which imbues the togetherness with a kind of meaning and evokes something more than compliance and order. It is easy to imagine routine as something students can improve at—i.e. having the materials they need on their desks, prepared for class to start on time. In fact, that students get better at routines is explicit in the rhetoric teachers encounter around routines. Routines are

crucial, we are told, at the outset of the school year. We must stick to them so the classroom participants grow more adept in their execution. Through routine, the managerial and procedural aspects of running a classroom become systematized and automatic so as to restrict their interference with the work of learning. Ritual, however, is an evocation—a symbolic *being-at-home* in the world, a sacred transcendence of the profane. It is hard to imagine "getting better" or measuring improvement on a ritual. The ritual *is*. To rephrase, classroom routines gift teacher and student with order and streamlined systems of communication and behavior. Classroom actions distinctly characterized by the quality of ritual, on the other hand, gift teacher and student with sacrality—a set apart, present, and spirited wholeness. Such rituals might occasionally be housed in space made possible by routines, like the "do now" or "bell ringer," both terms that indicate something for students (and sometimes teachers) to do immediately upon arrival or at the ring of the bell. Yet, rituals need not be routines to make the classroom space more inhabitable. The easily managed and monotone behavior routines require is not that which ritual provokes and should not describe the predominant demeanor of teachers and students. The category of ritual, as that which coheres its participants and has no rubric, seems only fitting as a feature of the practice of teaching poetry.

Ritual as Relationship

Acknowledging how Maeve's discussion of ritual is inseparable from the *poetry* ritual she was considering at the time of our discussion, I remember words from Matthew Zapruder. Zapruder writes, "It could be said the relationship of poems to what we intuit but can never fully say makes them like prayer, that unending effort to bring someone closer to the divine, without pretending the divine could ever be fully known or understood" (2017, p. 13). Ritual—perhaps doubly so if of the poetic variety—stands in the glow of the unknowable and the untamable. In

that way, ritual offers the practice of teaching poetry a form with which to handle poetry's mystery.

Think of the priest. Saying mass, from the point of view of the priest, is a practice. The priest says mass repetitively for the parishioners but the practice of priesthood itself is ongoing for him. Within the context of the mass, rituals exist and structure the event. For the priest, this is all part of the practice. Yet, for the parishioners, going to mass is less about a practice in the MacIntyrian sense—less an apprenticeship toward priesthood themselves—but more about ritual and how participating in it then affords them common bonds, a relationship to the divine, and so on. The ritual is experienced by the parishioners as part of the priest's enactment of his practice. And so too with teaching poetry. Like the priest thinks deeply and deliberately about the performance of the rituals in mass service, so too does the poetry teacher about the rituals her students experience in her classroom. For example, though her students experience the ritual once a day—like the parishioners once a week—the teacher's engagement in the practice of teaching poetry, and thus engagement in performing the rituals associated with that practice, is an ongoing act. Whether it is a daily poetry ritual, monthly poetry slam, or another ritualistic engagement of poetry, the teacher experiences the practice before, during, and after the ritual.

To continue to extend the priest-parishioner analogy, the practice and rituals of the priest service the divine. When a parishioner goes to mass, they sit in the presence of God and participate in the rituals, recognizing that they engage ritualistically as a way to encounter God despite the ultimate unknowability of the divine. So they take communion, light a candle, and confess their sins. Religious traditions, like the Catholicism of my example, have their various "strategic way[s] of acting" (Bell, 2009, p. 67) in ritual that allow people to participate, communally, in something far beyond their metaphysical grasp. Participating in ritual offers a

way of being in-relation to something but not in-relation in the spirit of taming it. Participating in the ritual of reading poetry every day offers a way of being in-relation to making meaning, perceiving gestalts, without attempting to vacuum-seal the contents of the poem into that which might be explicable, measurable, or sayable.

This way of conceptualizing ritual—as a part of the practice of teaching poetry and an experience specifically offered to the student as a means through which to experience a relationship with the unsayable—remains full of meaning for the teacher as practitioner. That the teacher does not experience the ritual in the same way as her students does not render it bankrupt or rote. The ongoing quality of such a practice, like the priest saying mass each day of the week, means the teacher has specific access to the ritual's meaning, considering the whole as greater than the sum of its parts. Zwicky (2020) writes:

> According to Roo Borson, *Fresh is always fresh.* This is Pound's imperative in the descriptive mood. It tells us how to recognize that someone has made something significant: what they've made *stays* new. It continues to surprise with every reading. Mathematicians have noticed this about good proofs: they 're-surprise' those who think them through anew. This recurring surprise is what makes a good proof satisfying. And it's the same with the arts. The connoisseurs, the experts, are those who continually re-savor masterpieces, who re-experience, each time, what they experienced the first time: the shock of meaning.
>
> A great poem offers us this shock. It is always fresh because each time we read it, our mind experiences a gestalt shift with a pay-off: truth. 'Recognize,' then, does not mean 'see the same old same old'; it means re-cognize—that is, experience the *shift* in gestalts. (pp. 30-31, emphasis original)

And so what of the teacher who, year after year, reads, re-memorizes, and recites Wendell Berry's "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" to her students? Who re-cognizes again and again that they are not the crop she will live to harvest? Who finds wisdom again and again in doing that which does not compute? Who, weary over the morning news, is shocked again by the words "be joyful though you have considered all the facts" (2012)? Or the teacher who reads Mary Oliver's "I Worried" the day before his students take a dreaded standardized test? Or the teacher who reads May Swenson's "Analysis of Baseball" (1978) the day spring training begins, coaxing the sports fans in the crowd. Or the teacher who, on the day of her father's birthday, reads "what do I know of love's austere and lonely offices?" (Hayden, 1962) to her students, a secret moment of her own. Or what of the teacher, sipping burnt Folgers coffee from the lounge, who reads "Famous" by Naomi Shihab Nye (1995) again five periods that day for the eighth year in a row? While rituals are not those actions which a person "gets better at," I venture the practitioner—the teacher, the priest—is not left unmarked by such a quality of ongoing practice, not left unmarked by tapping into the goods of the practice of teaching poetry in this way.

Suggesting that this kind of practice might enrich the teacher was a notion that the teachers I dialogued with did not welcome right away—tending almost exclusively toward thinking about student experience and preference. In our first conversation, Maeve and I talked about how she used to read a poem of the day to start her classes, that she did so as her first classroom culture decision when she took over her cooperating teacher's classroom during student teaching. Now, decidedly re-engaging the poem of the day ritual, Maeve wondered if doing so was an act of "indulging myself." Similarly, Frank worried about the daily poem coming off as if he were saying to his students, "Hey! I love poetry, you guys should, too!" There is clear hesitancy toward the idea of any sort of literary profligacy that sacrifices care for

students and their larger engagement with the content. Yet, after a few attempts at the question in our first meeting, Maeve came back to our second conversation with some thoughts about what conducting the poetry ritual might mean for her and had meant for the past few weeks of engaging the ritual:

> I've been thinking about—and I'm not sure if this is the right thing—but I really enjoy it, and it puts me in a really good place to begin the class which definitely transcends the mood of the class period. [...] I'm not sure if some of the comfort that comes is from my own personal experience or my really liking the poem, but even if the 30-second mindful moment of reading the poem puts me in a good headspace of calmness. I let go of the rigidity of 'here's what we need to get done today; let's hit the agenda.' It kind of balances, I would say, for lack of a better term, some of the necessary task-master parts of the job.

Here I observe how ritual stands in against the profane, spiritless "task-master parts of the job," offering a set-apart re-cognizing of the classroom space. Esther gives a similar reflection on slotting a poem of the day during her "do now" slot, describing it as a "more personal" and "slower" way to start the class and one that she looked forward to. Ritual seems a small but mighty counterbalance against the institutional demands of the job. Allowing for the breath at the start of class affords Maeve a moment to inhabit the space more fully—as such, this ritual offers her students a similar kind of space, especially as it contrasts the frenetic pace of a school day. Too, the English classroom is likely the only one opening with the reading of a poem to start class. The uniqueness of this experience for the student is then a particular way the ELA classroom stands against the mechanized, maximize-every-minute stress of the schooling environment.

Rituals have the potential to transform the way a participant in that ritual relates to space and to community. Philosopher of technology Albert Borgmann writes of focal practices, a category I find particularly useful for conceptualizing the relational role of ritual in the classroom. Borgmann defines a focal practice as “the decided, regular, and normally communal devotion to a focal thing,” and describes how such focal things “gather our world and radiate significance in ways that contrast with the diversion and distraction afforded by commodities” (2003, p. 31). Esther, Maeve, and Frank’s ritual of reading a poem at the start of class might work much in the way Borgamann’s focal practice works—as a “decided, regular, and normally communal” deference to a poem and to the space the poem frees up as class begins. Further, Borgmann writes of device paradigm wherein a device is something that is used to bring about an end—for example, a microwave. On the other hand, Borgmann contrasts a device with a tool, where the tool is something that has a world of connections of its own and that presents its user with a way of relating to others a la focal practices—for example, a hearth. In this paradigm of the device versus the tool, the microwave versus the hearth, I count poetry a tool whereas standardized Common Core literacy more of a device. Both have their place, given the parameters within which teachers work. Yet, the institution of the school has plenty of devices—plenty of microwaves, so to speak. We can think of a number of “pedagimmick” (Holme, 2021) school fads that overconfidently purport to be a silver bullet fix for any and all issues with student engagement or grading or any host of real pedagogical needs. These plentiful devices are not built to compute meaning in the way that tools in Borgmann’s sense are. Zwicky gives us language of the machine for what Borgmann might call a device:

> Meaning isn’t structured in a way that will allow it to be made by a machine; there is no series of steps that can assure insight into the nature of the world. The process cannot be

> digitized. It is not programmable. This is because the perception of gestalts does not, by definition, occur in piecemeal, stepwise fashion: gestalts are wholes and perception of them occurs all at once and also as a whole. (Zwicky, 2020, p. 18)

Like a microwave cannot become that which gathers together all members of a home to contribute to its flourishing, sit in its warm light, feast, and sustain the relationships of the members, educational devices so often favored by the institution for their catchy efficiency cannot make meaning, cannot make students and teachers more whole. Ritual, as a dimension of the practice of teaching poetry, offers itself as a focal practice, a hearth around which to gather and regularly inhabit communal space. Whether it is through the teaching of poetry and the ritualization of a practice or not, it behooves us to consider how we make the classroom a space not devoid of focal practices—a space that, even if limited to the first five minutes, allows for the full, spirited, and engaged participation of its inhabitants.

Caesura 5

Performing the Ritual

On the last day of school

She recites Wendell Berry in her car

Readies herself to loose another crop

She will not live to harvest.

Envoi

Grandfather
  advised me:
    Learn a trade

I learned
  to sit at desk
    and condense

No layoff
  from this
    Condensery

—Lorine Niedecker, "Poet's work" (2002)[35]

We established [...] the intimate connection between the worlds of work and the quest for the good life. It is not merely a matter of choosing work in accordance with one's sense of what is most valuable to do, admirable to become, or fulfilling to participate in. For it is *inside* practices that we learn some of our most substantive lessons about what is good, admirable, and meaningful.

—Chris Higgins, *The Good Life of Teaching* (2011, p. 111)

When I started making poetry "my thing," I purchased Edward Hirsch's *The Essential Poet's Glossary* (2017) alongside a few other starter anthologies with my yearly teacher discretionary fund. Flipping through its contents one day after eighth period, I landed on the term envoi, or envoy. It means "send-off." I find Hirsch's definition delightful and will pen it here: "The half-stanza that concludes certain French forms, such as the ballade and the sestina. The troubadours called their envois *tornadas* ("returns"). The envoi is a final return to the subject, a

[35] *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works,* by Lorine Niedecker, edited by Jenny Penberthy, (c) 2002 by The Regents of the University of California. Published by the University of California Press.

valedictory summing up, and a clever send-off" (p. 94). What I offer here is more of a return to the subject and a send-off, in the spirit of an envoi, than a conclusion.

I have intimated, especially in the latter half of this dissertation, that engaging in an activity opens one to the influence of that activity. To the degree that the practices we participate in are conscious and, even, up to our own curation, there seems an important remaining note about the teacher's potential for self-cultivation. Those in the moral philosophy corner of the practice view give us language for reflection as we contemplate the doings of our classrooms. Higgins writes that practices are "themselves ethical sources and central sites of our moral education" and that occupations are "space[s] for self-enactment" (2011, p. 111). It is not uncommon to hear the word "vocation" in descriptions of the teaching profession. This is an apt word in my estimation as it denotes something *more than* a means to earn a livelihood. Teaching is one of those "vocations that seem to offer a tighter connection between life and livelihood [...] the kind of focused attention around which a life might take shape" (Crawford, 2009, p. 182). Investing in the formation of young people is the kind of vocation in which this connection is tautly drawn.

That practices have a progressive, self-unveiling dimension to their activity is especially salient when meditating on the life of a teacher—a life full of repetitive practice, primed for the successive realization of goods. If we consider the practice of teaching poetry within this frame, especially when inclusive of ritual, we see the embodiment of a continuous deepening and growing competency in working with meaning. Esther tells me that she has "come to really love poetry over the course of teaching it and reading it more," despite it being "rough starting out." Esther's trajectory is not unlike my own, nor unlike other teachers who, by working with the form over their careers, fall in love with poetry. Beyond just repeated exposure and a vague

"warming up" to it, Talbot Brewer articulates how and why the teacher's increased engagement yields increased affection:

> Sometimes we engage in activities in the name of some intrinsic goodness or value that we see in those activities rather than in the name of conceptually independent goods that the activities might produce or promote. Some such activities have a self-unveiling character, in the sense that each successive engagement yields a further stretch of understanding of the goods internal to the activity, hence of what would count as a proper engagement in it. If the activity's constitutive goods are complex and elusive enough, this dialectical process can be reiterated indefinitely, with each successive engagement yielding a clearer grasp of the activity's proper form and preparing the way for a still more adequate and hence more revealing engagement in it. (2009, p. 35)

The teacher might decide to include a poem in her classroom for no more of a reason than a vague sense that her students should read poetry and, in doing so, feel both perplexed by the expertise required of her to work with it and glad for the quality of conversation it evoked among her students. Something about working with poetry with her students reveals itself to her, and she tries it again, equipped with more clarity on how form functions or how the poet leverages consonance. Poetry's goods seem complex and elusive enough to engage afresh with it each time, each class period yielding different insight; the teacher, there for each successive class period, yielding even more. The compounding returns of this kind of experience over years not only gifts the teacher with increased competence and excellence in understanding the craft of poetry and how to teach it, but it also works to form the teacher as a person.

Prioritizing poetry as the specific content as well as the kind of "continuously self-deepening activity" (Brewer, 2009, p. 46) that it is to teach it, punctuates the power of thinking

about the teaching of poetry with a practice view. The prioritization of poetry in the classroom means the prioritization of *meaning* as a practice. If we follow Zwicky that teaching poetry "is an attempt to assist others in the perception of gestalts" (2020, p. 36), then the teacher is "yielding a clearer grasp" (Brewer, 2009, p. 35) of how to make meaning—the doing of which is transformative for her classroom and her life. When Maeve says we teach students what matters by how we spend the 48 minutes they share with us, I think of how precious it is to cede the classroom floor to that which the poem does best—evoking us to participate in the meaningful. How we spend those 48 minutes tells us what goods we prioritize. And, "in deciding what goods to prioritise," Higgins writes, "we define ourselves and give shape to our lives" (2011, p. 52). How might we give meaningful shape to the classroom community? How might that then give shape to our lives? I have suggested that teaching poetry seems a prime way to do this, especially when pursued through the act of ritual.

By emphasizing ritual, practice, and the oft-neglected form of poetry, I do not intend to draw a line in the sand that sorts teachers into those who do and those who don't. To do so would concretize the whims of prior experiences, ossify the way those with such experiences might come to understand them, and exclude all those who have yet to reap the bounty of a poetry teaching life. Rather, I take seriously that the practices of teaching, poetry, and their combinatory force are "continuously self-deepening activities" (Brewer, 2009, p. 46). We must begin all activities at *some* point; every master craftsman begins as an apprentice. We are always becoming and, thus, remain open to the possibility of encountering that which might re-determine our pedagogies. Just as Frank, Esther, and Maeve's personal engagements with and preferences for poetry give shape to their classroom practices, and will continue to do so throughout their careers, there always exists the ready possibility for the teacher to experience a

new host of formative experiences. While this might be the work of teacher preparation, mentorship programs, professional development, or other institutionalized structures, I hope these pages illuminate openings that beckon the teacher to pick up a poem in casual and curious ways—as if stumbled upon like Frank's Mary Oliver poetry book, divinely discarded on a stoop.

Though I think poetry and ritual are particularly potent in providing meaningful structure for our classrooms, the practice view in general might expand the way teachers from a variety of disciplines seek to aid their students in living meaningful lives. I look to Higgins once more to name the import of our teaching work, be that poetry or otherwise: "The distinctive moral phenomenology of a practice offers its practitioners an insight into how it is excellent to be in the world by teaching us how to be in a particular world" (2011, p. 59). Though I do not think poetry or English teaching are the only ways for a teacher to access feelings of usefulness, self-cultivation, reciprocity between teaching and life, or virtue, this dissertation has tried to show that poetry is a fecund site for these goods in the life of the teacher. As Zwicky reminds us, "Poetry may be a non-market genre. But meaning isn't. Meaning is not a genre at all. It's the iridescent, flowing substance of any life worth living" (2020, p. 49). When I read a poem each day to start class and in my writing here about poetry and its teaching, I have been foremost concerned with that flowing substance of meaning and how it might come to exist in the space of our classrooms and, by extension, our lives.

In other words—or, in the words I have tried to deploy throughout these pages—my interest has been with wholeness and on that which is meaningful. To conceive of the classroom as a place concerned with gestalts and instruction in the perception of meaning is, for me, to imagine the poetry classroom. Mighty implications and possibilities exist in the kind of enduring, transmutable *habitus* that results from such a classroom community and practice. Practicing in

the ways I have sketched here—practicing toward meaning and subsequently the development of certain transposable dispositions toward meaning's future realization—forms teachers, students, and their subsequent sense of agency within their educational context. Poetry's relationship to language mirrors ritual's relationship to teaching. Poetry enlivens language, taking its raw material and mundanity as its "pressed oil" (Hirshfield, 1997, p. 32), transforming it into language that jolts our senses, compels us towards beauty, attunes us anew, and fortifies our being. Ritual alights the classroom with a communal togetherness, a sense of being-at-home amidst the unknowable, and a breath that life (school) is not all striving—that deep *being* might be that moment's goal. In these ways and in more than captured here, poetry is to language what ritual is to teaching. Poetry and ritual give a certain shape to their counterparts, a shape more whole and more full of the possibility for the experience of meaning for those that participate in them. While not every language-user who reads a poem will find themselves and their language transformed or otherwise on a trajectory towards beauty, such possibilities have entered the language user's purview. So too with the student who experiences a classroom ritual. Though not all will suddenly feel an invitation to deeper inhabitance, some might. The existence of these openings should provoke us. The increased chance that student and teacher might come to more fully grab hold of that which is meaningful compels us to consider more deeply the spirit of our classrooms. Catching a glimpse of meaning and wholeness need not be our limit; both grow in their intelligibility, powerfully so, with each poem read and ritual performed. These are the dimensions offered to the teacher of poetry.

What I hope to illustrate throughout this project is that a greater attentiveness to the flowy substance of meaning is possible, worthwhile, and transformative. In part, this quality of attentiveness resides in the goods of poetry, part of its gift to its practitioners. It also lives inside

of the practice of teaching, attending to a view of ourselves and our students as whole beings. The practice of teaching poetry is concerned with the goods of poetry and of teaching. Yet, the practice is not confined by those explicitly tradition-bound goods but exists as something more than them. All that it is to teach poetry *means* more than the goods of both teaching and poetry together.

This care for wholes, the wholes of poetry, teaching, and the people involved stands at odds with the education of our age, in Nietzsche's terms, or a culture of profit and things which compute in Berry's frame. While the form of poetry, practice of ritual, and care for human wholeness are where meaning lives, they are peripheral to the contemporary school and its concerns. Attention to what has been made peripheral might allow for a necessary reassessment of our tunnel vision; and, perhaps more incisively, reveal how the act of disregarding that which makes for a whole life as superfluous might not be innocently mistaken but aggressively unvirtuous. Poetry and ritual's categorical superfluousness in our highly mechanized school culture creates a landscape where such peripheral status is inherited—it is the rule, not the exception, for teacher and student to regard poetry with less than favorable valuations. Throughout this project, I have not chosen to sink us into the kind of first-shaking and name-calling that I could (or maybe, even, should) have. That ours is an educational environment plagued by dehumanizations large and small is cause for lament and needs little further explanation. When Wendell Berry, the *mad farmer*, says, "be joyful / though you have considered all the facts," I take the poem as a site for hope and a refusal of despair. Poetry ceaselessly offers itself to us, alive in our world—on subway cars and Instagram, in the Library of Congress, bedtime stories, and song lyrics. Poetry can never be completely snuffed out by the truncated mechanism of the school—even in this nadir of "late capitalism"—try as it might. Joy

and wholeness still know how to eek their way out between the cinder blocks, smuggle their way into an otherwise intended learning objective, and provoke us to see more clearly both the present and the possible.

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Appendix A

The following tables are based on the most recently published data regarding teacher and student demographics as made available by the 2021-22 School Quality Snapshot from the New York City Department of Education and the 2022-2023 Illinois School Report card from the Illinois State Board of Education.

Table A1: Esther's School, New York City, New York.
Total enrollment, approximately 1,500 students

Student Demographics	**Teacher Demographics**
Asian: 10% Black: 13% Hispanic or Latinx: 42% Native American: <1% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: <1% White: 24% English language learners: 1% Students with IEPs: 23% Female: 67% Male: 33% Neither female nor male: 0%	Asian: 12% Black: 14% Hispanic or Latinx: 10% Native American: 0% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0% White: 63%

Table A2: Frank's School, New York City, New York.
Total enrollment, approximately 500 students

Student Demographics	Teacher Demographics
Asian: 12%	Asian: 21%
Black: 1%	Black: 0%
Hispanic or Latinx: 79%	Hispanic or Latinx: 21%
Native American: <1%	Native American: 0%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0%	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0%
White: 7%	White: 52%
English language learners: 82%	
Students with IEPs: 1%	
Female: 53%	
Male: 47%	
Neither female nor male: 0%	

Table A3: Maeve's School, Chicagoland Suburbs, Illinois.
Total enrollment, approximately 2,200 students

Student Demographics	Teacher Demographics
Asian: 22%	Asian: 4%
Black: 6%	Black: 2%
Hispanic or Latinx: 36%	Hispanic or Latinx: 7%
Native American: 0%	Native American: 0%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0%	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0%
White: 33%	White: 86%
Two or More Races: 3%	
English language learners: 14%	
Students with IEPs: 14%	
Female: 47%	
Male: 53%	
Neither female nor male: 0%	