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STEPHANIE BURT. *DON'T READ POETRY. A BOOK ABOUT HOW TO READ POEMS*.

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In an increasingly polarised and digitalised world, universities, and society at large, suffer from a profound lack of courses about poetry poetic education. This is but one of the many conclusions readers may draw after engaging with Stephanie Burt's *Don't Read Poetry. A Book About How To Read Poems*, published in 2019 by Basic Books.

Through an illuminating perspective attuned to the contemporary reader —whether versed in the art of poetry or not at all— and the textures of everyday life, this essay offers an exploration of a myriad of poetic voices drawing predominantly from the distinguished literary traditions of British and US poetry, and ranging from George Herbert to Marianne Moore, passing through A. R. Ammons and T. S. Eliot, whose reflections on the art of writing permeate the chapters. Beneath an ironic title chosen with deliberate intent, Burt encourages readers not to fear an encounter with the lyric text, whether mystical or social, performative or confessional. For poetry, of all literary genres, comes closest to the intimacy of the human being, to solitude itself, and thus to the universality of feeling. As the pages unfold, the author increasingly grounds herself in the conviction that "to read lyric poetry is to discover commonalities of human feeling—however approximate, however conjectural—across time and space" (32).

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In the introduction, Burt makes clear that it is not her commitment to read poetry in the abstract, but rather to "read and teach the work of individual poets who write poems" (13). For the readers to engage deeply with poetry and to recognise that their sorrow has been poured into another body, another era, and given voice by a poet, they must not regard poetry as a gilded delirium sealed within a silver urn. On the contrary, a poem should be regarded as a leaf of grass, as the simplest and most ordinary unit of measure to be found in one's immediate surroundings. This is how the author understands the poetic vocation and how she conveys it to us: not as a grand abstraction, but as an accumulation of small sufferings and modest joys that have made poetry a special language, a shared ground of understanding.

The first chapter revolves around the concept of emotion in poetry, approaching the description and definition of the lyric poem. As a point of reference, it invokes Catullus's timeless "Odi et amo" (p. 24), written millennia ago, to illustrate the ubiquity of the amorous sentiment and to foreground it alongside contemporary poets such as Laura Kasischke (28) and Morgan Parker (31). The latter's poetry, characterised by its language with its feet firmly on the ground, so contrary to *heavenly* poetry (33), demonstrates that the reasons for turning to poetry are limitless and arise equally from beauty and from necessity, from poverty as well as from failure. It is necessary, then, to speak of poetry's democratising power, for, as Emily Dickinson would say, there exist dwellings fairer than prose (48).

Not only do the most concealed feelings or the most intimate impulses take the reins of poems, but the poets are not alone in holding authority over their composition. In the second chapter, Burt observes that an effective way of connecting with readers is using a mask, that is to say, a poetic persona, from which to direct their discourse to an addressee or interlocutor. Burt also refers here to the option of the dramatic monologue in poetry, a form that has remained popular since its development by Victorian poets such as Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Christina Rossetti, among others. The chapter advances a reappraisal of emerging voices, such as that of Jennifer Chang (75), which subvert the play of masks and mock the system of egos commonly associated with canonical male poetry. Numerous and varied traditions have adopted this mode of verse-making, and Burt recalls key figures of the last decades, among them the Spaniard Jaime Gil de Biedma (72), the

Serbian American Charles Simic (71), and the Vietnamese American Ocean Vuong (72).

The third chapter turns to the forms of the poem, presenting problems as linguistic or formal games through which the poet seeks to capture the attention of an audience, conceal encrypted messages, or submit to formal constraint—an approach that, according to Burt, stimulates invention and "spur[s] delight" (p. 150). This is a chapter of recognition: not merely of modes of writing that linger at the margins of convention, but also—quite the contrary—of figures such as Phillis Wheatley. Burt offers a generous and meticulous account of Wheatley as "the first African American poet to publish a book of poems and the first to gain recognition for her poetry," who chose to write in the manner of the most exalted English poets (105). Words, as the author suggests, are magical, and the ways in which they are configured give shape to poets themselves. Yet poets, in turn, may choose to adapt themselves those very codes and transform them, rendering poetry an unending tale.

The fourth and fifth chapters address the notion of difficulty and language and demonstrate the extent to which "opaque or resistant language can instruct and delight, and how some non- or anti-sense in poetry may help us spot nonsense, or hypocrisy, or lies, in the world, outside poems" (p. 153). Burt's argument ultimately suggests that it is not reading poetry, and still less the teaching of poetry that should inspire apprehension, but rather the opposite. In a society that privileges academic achievement and measurable outcomes over process, it is essential to cultivate the critical awareness of students of Philology: to cultivate means to prompt reflection, to read and reread a single sentence—a line of poetry—, to decipher through poetry's codes the feelings shared by human beings, which remain, after all, much the same as they were centuries ago. As Burt makes it clear, poetry ought to be treated as a central subject in the classroom. Just as mathematics equips individuals with the capacity for calculation and safeguards them against deception in matters such as mortgage interest rates, so poetry cultivates and refines students' intellectual aptitudes and transferable competencies, contributing in a formative way to the education and shaping of the youngest generations' minds.

Matters of community, of the self and the other, and of what it means to belong to a collective—whether as part of a poetic generation or as members of a readership— also find a place in this essay. Burt gathers a range of testimonies of poets who have forged relationality

through their writing, strengthening bonds with fellow writers and with readers alike. Such is the case of Rupi Kaur within the internet culture of the 2010s (207), and of one of the most widely discussed figures in North America, the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, whose *Howl* "sold nearly a million copies before the poet's death in 1997" (233). Nor does the author overlook other communities that enact political and cultural resistance through poetry. One such figure is the Oglala Lakota poet Layli Long Soldier, whose collection *Whereas* has exerted notable influence in the United States in recent years for incorporating "President Barack Obama's 2009 apology to Native Americans for centuries of forced removals" (253). Long Soldier is further celebrated, alongside several other Native American poets, for affirming the value of Indigenous communities and for employing their mother tongues in a poetry that must remain accessible and democratic, a poetry meant to be read in classrooms, in prisons (237), in police stations, and in parks alike.

Poetry, as Stephanie Burt observes in her insightful essay, is meant to be shared, never stifled by fear nor punished into silence, and for that reason *Don't Read Poetry* (Basic Books, 2019) is a work worthy of celebration. At once a critical survey and an impassioned invitation to reading poetry, the book fulfils a twofold mission: to dismantle the intimidation that so often surrounds the lyric text, and to restore poetry to its rightful place, not as a rarefied object of scholarly contemplation, but as a living form of human expression accessible to all. Through six thematically organised chapters, Burt weaves together a diverse constellation of English-speaking poetic voices spanning centuries, from Ocean Vuong to John Donne, and from Phillis Wheatley to Layli Long Soldier. The work's most enduring contribution lies in its insistence on poetry's democratic and pedagogical vocation. In a cultural landscape increasingly hostile to slowness, ambiguity, and contemplation, Burt makes a compelling and timely case for the inclusion of poetry at the heart of educational curricula. In this sense, *Don't Read Poetry* is not merely a guide to reading poems, but a manifesto for a more human and attentive way of engaging with the world.