

**“Got Poetry?” by Jim Holt**  
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A few years ago, I started learning poetry by heart on a daily basis. I’ve now memorized about a hundred poems, some of them quite long — more than 2,000 lines in all, not including limericks and Bob Dylan lyrics. I recite them to myself while jogging along the Hudson River, quite loudly if no other joggers are within earshot. I do the same, but more quietly, while walking around Manhattan on errands — just another guy on an invisible cellphone.

This may seem eccentric, not to say masochistic. If you are a baby boomer like me (or older), your high school English teacher probably forced you to learn some poetry by heart for class recitation. How we howled in protest! What was the point of memorizing Shakespeare’s “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” sonnet or — in Middle English, no less! — the first 18 lines of “The Canterbury Tales”? Our teacher could never answer this question to our satisfaction; the best she could do was some drivel about our feeling “culturally confident.” But memorize them we did, in big painful chunks, by rote repetition. (There is torture lurking in the very word “rote,” which is conjectured to come from the Latin *rota*, meaning “wheel.”)

A few lucky types seem to memorize great swaths of poetry without even trying. George Orwell said that when a verse passage “has really rung the bell” — as the early T. S. Eliot invariably did for him — he could remember 20 or 30 lines after a single reading. Samuel Johnson, according to Boswell, had a similar mnemonic gift. Christopher Hitchens — who carries around in his head a small anthology of verse, all of which, as his friend Ian McEwan says, is “instantly neurologically available” — also seems to absorb poems by osmosis. (Or maybe he swots them up late at night after his dinner-party guests have all passed out.) Richard Howard once told me that he eased into the memorization habit as a child, when his parents rewarded him with a dime for each poem he learned.

For the rest of us, the key to memorizing a poem painlessly is to do it incrementally, in tiny bits. I knock a couple of new lines into my head each morning before breakfast, hooking them onto what I’ve already got. At the moment, I’m 22 lines into Tennyson’s “Ulysses,” with 48 lines to go. It will take me about a month to learn the whole thing at this leisurely pace, but in the end I’ll be the possessor of a nice big piece of poetical real estate, one that I will always be able to revisit and roam about in.

The process of memorizing a poem is fairly mechanical at first. You cling to the meter and rhyme scheme (if there is one), declaiming the lines in a sort of sing-songy way without worrying too much about what they mean. But then something organic starts to happen. Mere memorization gives way to performance. You begin to feel the tension between the abstract meter of the poem — the “duh DA duh DA duh DA duh DA duh DA” of iambic pentameter, say — and the rhythms arising from the actual sense of the words. (Part of the genius of Yeats or Pope is the way they intensify meaning by bucking against the meter.) It’s a physical feeling, and it’s a deeply pleasurable one. You can get something like it by reading the poem out loud off the page, but the sensation is far more powerful when the words come from within. (The act of reading tends to spoil physical pleasure.) It’s the difference between sight-reading a Beethoven piano sonata and playing it from memory — doing the latter, you somehow feel you come closer to channeling the composer’s emotions. And with poetry you don’t need a piano.

That’s my case for learning poetry by heart. It’s all about pleasure. And it’s a cheap pleasure. Between the covers of any decent anthology you have an entire sea to swim in. If you don’t have one left over from your college days, any good bookstore, new or used, will offer an embarrassment of choices for a few bucks — Oxford, Penguin, Norton, etc. Or you might try *ESSENTIAL PLEASURES: A New Anthology of Poems to Read Aloud* (Norton, \$29.95), edited by the former United States poet laureate Robert Pinsky.

But which poems to memorize? I started with Auden's "This Lunar Beauty" — a little lyric that Stephen Spender once said was the most beautiful thing in all of Auden. Next I tried Robert Browning's dramatic monologue "My Last Duchess" — a Nabokov novel compressed into 56 lines. Browning, although not quite a first-rate poet, proved to be especially fun to memorize because of his exotic vocabulary and jaw-breaking diction. For sheer length, the most ambitious poem I've tackled is Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" (a favorite, as it happens, of Stephen King). At 204 lines, it takes 10 minutes to get through — just the time it takes me to walk from my apartment to the Chinese laundry.

By now, my mental treasury of verse pretty much spans everything from Chaucer up to the present. (Tennyson was the last major gap, which I'm just now plugging.) There's a heavy concentration of Shakespeare, Keats and Yeats (whose symbolic hocus-pocus finally makes some sense to me), plenty of delightful warhorses like "To His Coy Mistress" and "Kubla Khan" and a good bit of light verse (like a long poem about a duck-billed platypus that becomes a brilliant diplomat only to resign in disgrace after laying an egg). Although I'm a little thin on contemporary verse, one of the best poems I've learned by heart is Richard Wilbur's "Baroque Wall-Fountain in the Villa Sciarra." Its delicate rhythms at first proved rebarbative to my memory, but when I finally got it down I was so delighted with it that I wrote Wilbur a fan letter. He wrote back, saying that he always advised his students to memorize poems: "If one is delayed in a bus terminal, or sitting in a foxhole, it's wonderful to have an inner anthology to say over, yet again, in one's mind."

One should be skeptical, though, of some of the alleged advantages cited by champions of poetry memorization. "I wonder if anyone who has memorized a lot of poetry . . . can fail to write coherent sentences and paragraphs," Robert Pinsky once said. Well, responded David Bromwich, just take a look at the autobiography of Marlon Brando, who memorized heaps of Shakespeare.

Are there cognitive benefits? I sometimes feel that my mnemonic horsepower is increasing, but that's probably an illusion. "Memorizing poetry does seem to make people a bit better at memorizing poetry," Geoffrey Nunberg has observed, "but there's no evidence that the skill carries over to other tasks."

Nor, as I have found, will memorizing poetry make you more popular. Rather the reverse. No one wants to hear you declaim it. Almost no one, anyway. I do have one friend, a Wall Street bond-trader, who can't get enough of my recitations. He takes me to the Grand Havana Cigar Club, high above Midtown Manhattan, and sits rapt as I intone, "The unpurged images of day recede. . . ." He calls to one of the stunningly pretty waitresses. "Come over here and listen to my friend recite this Yeats poem." Oh dear.

The grandest claim for memorizing poetry is made by Clive James, himself a formidable repository of memorized verse. In his book "Cultural Amnesia," James declares that "the future of the humanities as a common possession depends on the restoration of a simple, single ideal: getting poetry by heart." A noble sentiment. I just wish that James had given us some reason for thinking it was true.

I don't have one myself, but I hope that I have at least dispelled three myths.

*Myth No. 1: Poetry is painful to memorize.* It is not at all painful. Just do a line or two a day.

*Myth No. 2: There isn't enough room in your memory to store a lot of poetry.* Bad analogy. Memory is a muscle, not a quart jar.

*Myth No. 3: Everyone needs an iPod.* You do not need an iPod. Memorize poetry instead.

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