

*Interview*

**Now You See It:  
Revisiting and Revising Some Former Thoughts on Poetry in EFL**

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### Introduction

Whilst sometimes unsettling, it is instructive to reflect on who we were and what we thought and said and did in former and formative times. If it were not so, the notion of “self-development” would make little sense and be less of a topical hot potato in the professional lives of “veteran” (sigh: over 30 years in the saddle now) teachers such as myself (e.g., Larrivee, 2006; Núñez Pardo & Téllez Téllez, 2015). Here we are now, but, just as importantly: where were we then?

Specifically, astride this chasm of introspective reassessment that yawns wider in middle age, a sudden bridge of synchronicity brings me to this particular opportunity for meaningful self-re-evaluation. Indefatigable LiLT Coordinator Tara McIlroy recently sent me a link to fellow LiLT SIG member Luke Draper’s (excellent) National JALT Conference 2021 online presentation, “Reading for a Brighter Future: Literature and Global Citizenship in the Language Classroom” (Draper, 2021) in which he very generously quotes from an interview I did in 2009, for a long since defunct Japan-based ELTNEWS website.

In his NatJALT talk, Draper claimed (echoing my own suspicions) that the interview in question is currently nowhere to be found, long since relegated to a hidden hinterland of forgotten documents buried in electronic ether. However, digital deerstalker on and detective work (courtesy of a ‘time machine’ salvage engine) done, a cobwebbed, archived version proved finally forthcoming. Full of trepidation, I reread what I had said those dozen years ago. To my surprise, it is rather good, or at least not all rather bad. I did, I now remember, receive lots of very kind and positive feedback at the time it originally appeared (“cards and letters from people I don’t even know,” as Glen Campbell would’ve put it), and I was saddened when the host website shut down morphed into something else and all its former content, including me, vanished a few summers thereafter. It seemed such a shame to have lost it forever, but I forgot about it eventually.

Until Luke, and Tara. It was then suggested that I might (if copyright permission to reprint were granted, which it duly was) “revisit” the 2009 interview for this journal. So here we are, and here is the unedited transcript of the original interview:

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*Dr. Paul Hullah is Associate Professor of British Literature and Culture at Meiji Gakuin University. He has published several EFL textbooks, and has also written several volumes of award-winning poetry, short stories and literary criticism. He was co-editor of the authorized collection of the poetry of Dame Iris Murdoch, and co-edited Playback and talk shows: New Edinburgh crimes, by his friend Ian Rankin, the first book of Inspector Rebus stories to be published in Japan. His most recent publication is Britain Today, which he co-wrote with Masayuki Teranishi, and is published by Cengage. The interview was conducted by John Lowe on Friday 6th March 2009.*

**John:** Hello Paul – thanks for agreeing to do the interview. Could you tell us a little about your background prior to coming to Japan?

**Paul:** Certainly. I was born in Yorkshire, and went to Ripon Grammar School – a traditional English school – and then on to Edinburgh University where I was fortunate to receive a degree, first class with honours, in English Language and Literature. This enabled me to continue my studies at

Edinburgh University, where I did my PhD in ‘The Poetry of Christina Rossetti’. After that, although I was teaching Shakespeare tutorials at the university, I couldn’t get a full-time job in Edinburgh. And then, out of the blue, I was offered a teaching position in Japan – at Okayama National University.

**John:** Did the idea of going to Japan attract you?

**Paul:** I had always been interested in Japanese poetry, *haiku* and *tanka*, but mainly I fancied a fresh challenge in a culture that, looked at from afar, appeared wholly alien to that in which I’d been raised. But to be honest, I didn’t know a great deal about Okayama and the job ahead.

**John:** So how did it work out?

**Paul:** Very well, actually. Although I was initially employed on a two-year *Gaikokujin Kyoushi* (foreign lecturer) contract, this was extended, and I stayed at that university for a total of 10 years. But, as there was no chance of this becoming a permanent position – every year I was given a one-year contract extension – and I was being pushed to teach more and more basic *eikaiwa*-style classes, I decided to leave. Around that time, I did become rather despondent, had an early mid-life crisis, and started to wonder if there really was a place for someone like me in Japan – an English teacher who wanted to teach literature or culture *realistically*, without watering down the subject matter so much that it ended up being unauthentic, dishonest. I had a couple of temporary teaching positions that didn’t really suit me, then in April 2005 I became an Associate Professor of English at Miyazaki National University in Kyushu. I was very happy there, and Kyushu is a beautiful place to live, but it was only a 3-year contract and, again, I felt that my usage of literature in the classroom was tolerated, rather than encouraged. But by that time I had necessarily become more interested and involved in EFL *per se* and active in JALT. I became President of Miyazaki JALT, published some papers in EFL, and all the time I was arguing for texts that challenged students intellectually. I was now in my forties, my Japanese wife was chronically unwell, and I wanted the psychological and financial security that a tenured position could offer. It was a stressful time for me.

**John:** What happened next?

**Paul:** Well, then I saw the position advertised at Meiji Gakuin University, and I thought it seemed tailor-made for me at that stage in my career. I applied, got the job, and I’ve been there since April 2008. It’s a fantastic position, a dream come true to work there. I teach 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year students who are all English majors, and I teach Romantic, Victorian and Modern British poetry. I also have a class where I trace the birth of lyric poetry in Britain and show how it links to pop lyrics of the modern day. I show how the Sex Pistols can be connected to medieval poetry, and we study song words by Morrissey, The Sisters of Mercy, Arctic Monkeys, and show how written poetry and pop song words are related and do similar things with language. Don’t forget, in their day poets such as Byron, Shelley, and Swinburne were the equivalent of today’s rock stars.

**John:** So after 16 years of teaching in Japan, would you call yourself an EFL teacher or an English literature teacher?

**Paul:** Perhaps I’m fated to be a Jack-of-all-trades and a master of none. I have a passionate love of language *and* literature, and also a passion for *teaching*. And none of these passions contradict each other. I have taught literature in English to English majors and to non-English majors. For the first few years of teaching I’d take Penguin classics into the classroom – *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Henry James, Katherine Mansfield, short stories.

**John:** So you taught English through literature?

**Paul:** When I first arrived in Japan, I thought I was going to teach English literature full stop; but of course, I had to adapt my approach for second language learners. I adapted my content-based courses to include more language-oriented components, and the students really benefited from and enjoyed this approach. So I collaborated with a Japanese colleague to write some EFL textbooks that foregrounded authentic literary content. The aim was to provide appropriate language scaffolding to the students so they could then confidently interpret the literary texts in a creative, meaningful and mature way.

**John:** So you didn't use traditional EFL texts?

**Paul:** Not at first, no. Don't forget, this was 1992, and many national universities used to look down on 'communicative' EFL texts; those kinds of texts, the 'communicative' 'task-based' 'conversation' course books, didn't really start creeping into the university system until the mid-nineties. I strongly believed that such texts were all too often 'dumbing down' the teaching of language and more suited to school kids than university learners. The design and layout of some textbooks seemed puerile and childish, cartoons and gaudy illustrations, and I was worried that students would stop taking English seriously. Such books and the teaching style they spawned seemed to me to promote entertainment instead of education. And to this day, there are some areas of EFL textbook teaching that concern me – such as oversimplifying the way content is presented to learners at university level. A lot of the material is just not suited to their maturity and to their intellectual potential.

**John:** But can Japanese students cope with the language level of texts that you'd like to teach?

**Paul:** If they work hard and are taught conscientiously, yes. I present some quite complex English literary texts to English major students at Meiji Gakuin University. We read and discuss, explicate them into more manageable *language* whilst ideally not compromising or reducing the intellectual depth. It works and they thrive and they tell me they love it. It's an approach that respects them as mature, thinking, adult learners and challenges them intellectually whilst holistically improving their language skills. But I don't blithely prescribe this approach, say, to students in a private Business English school, or Agriculture majors or students at a two-year Nursing college. So equally, and this is my point, I strenuously object to those people who preach to me that it is not appropriate to teach literature in the English language classroom here *at all*. You have to be adaptable and open and sensitive to learner needs and wishes; suit the word to the action, as Shakespeare had Hamlet say. Keep it *appropriate*.

**John:** Can you give a concrete example to illustrate what you're saying?

**Paul:** Yes. Recently I was interviewing some high school students who had applied to Meiji Gakuin University. I asked one applicant, 'What kind of books do you read in your free time?' She replied that she read biographies, and the last two she'd read (in Japanese and in English) were of Karl Marx and the Italian poet Dante. So what should we teach her in the university English class? How to buy stamps at the post office, or ask her what vegetables she likes? How brutally ignorant of her maturity level and goals, and cruelly stifling of her obvious intellectual potential would that be? I just think that for students such as that intelligent young woman, certain EFL texts featured on the English curriculum at many Japanese universities are inappropriate. We have to be wary of lowering the bar. If we raise the bar, keep standards high, students will raise their game accordingly; if we lower the bar, they'll tend to start treading water and eventually lose interest, give up. This pervasive dumbing down, this tragic misguided infantilization, is, in my mind, the single most alarming aspect of the direction in which English education is moving not only in Japan but also in other countries. I hope I don't sound supercilious or arrogant. I am not. I can only base what I say on what I have seen during the last 16 years as a passionate teacher of English. To paraphrase T. S. Eliot, 'The end of our journey is to reach the place where we started and know it for the first time', and now that I'm back teaching literature I think that I'm a far better teacher today because of my EFL experience and exposure to sundry styles of EFL instruction: many of them excellent and meaningful, but some not so appropriate to me or my students. Eliot also wrote, 'We shall not cease from exploration,' and that's important too for teachers: never to become complacent, always keep looking for ways to improve the students' experience and our own experience as educators.

**John:** Is there a place for English poetry in the language classroom?

**Paul:** Of course there is. I once did a survey of Japanese university students and asked them what adjectives they associated with English poetry. The overwhelming response was "difficult", "boring", "irrelevant", but the interesting fact was that 70% of the respondents had never read a poem in

English. So first of all we have to overcome the misconceptions of the Japanese student, the erroneous negative preconceptions they tend to have about literature, especially poetry, in English.

Poetry uses language in a creative way – it explodes meaning and uses language in joyful, imaginative, surprising ways. It brings dead phrases and expressions back to life, makes words beautiful and more than just prosaic functional tools. To think of language as only a means of communication is like saying that food is only a fuel, or that sex is only for reproduction. We're human beings and we take pleasure from food and sex, and that's what poetry does – it shows us that there's a *pleasure* in using language. Poetry can stimulate us and challenge us intellectually, and it asks the questions that through the ages we ask ourselves. Rather than asking, 'How do I get to the post office?' literature asks profound questions such as, 'To be or not to be?' Shakespeare is saying, is it worth staying alive when life seems unbearable? And although the language is simple, the question is profound and timeless. I believe that my role as a teacher is to *educate*, to draw out the latent potential of those students who have learned facts and have accumulated knowledge at school, but have been denied creativity.

**John:** So how does using poetry correct that?

**Paul:** Many Japanese students, who come through the Japanese school system, are told that there is a right answer and a wrong answer. Poetry challenges that naïve preconception in a healthy way, as poetry allows each reader to take away his or her own meaning from the poem. Poetry lets students personalize the English they've been taught elsewhere, make it their own. A poem can often use simple language to convey a complex meaning, which I feel is suited to adults. Learners can therefore find their own identity, form their own interpretation, and get ideas for expressing themselves originally, as poetry means different things to different people. There is not necessarily a correct or incorrect answer. Poetry mirrors life in that important respect.

**John:** I saw from your Wikipedia entry that you have written poetry yourself. Could you tell us about that?

**Paul:** That really grew from when I was in a rock band – I was a terrible singer, but I loved writing lyrics. But it really took off when I was at Okayama University and I met Iris Murdoch and her husband, John Bayley. They encouraged me to publish my poetry after they'd read a few of my poems. I've now had four books of poetry published, and writing poetry is something I love. People say, why do you write poetry? I say, why *don't* you write poetry? It just seems like breathing to me, comes as natural as leaves to a tree, as Keats wrote.

**John:** What do you think about graded readers? Don't they simplify language?

**Paul:** Yes, by definition they do; but, produced sensitively and intelligently, they don't have to simplify the themes or implications of the original text. I absolutely approve of extensive reading, and I support and applaud the kind of work teachers such as Rob Waring are doing. The aim is to get students reading as much as they can, and graded readers contribute a great deal to this approach. I particularly like the graded readers that introduce iconic 'classic' works of literature, and in the last few years at Meiji Gakuin we have introduced an extensive reading program – and the students love it.

I'd just like to say if it works – use it. Don't force literature upon students, but let's use it when it's effective and makes them motivated and inspired and happy.

**John:** Do you have any current projects?

**Paul:** I teach British Culture as well as British Literature, and I've just had a book published by Cengage, called *Britain Today*. It's different from certain other texts on the subject, in that it presents Britain as it really is *today* – 'warts and all'. We include topics such as knife crime and the racism of the National Front. This isn't about the village bobby and Miss Marple. I wrote the book with Masayuki Teranishi, a Professor of English at Hyogo University, whom I knew as a student some years ago at Okayama University. It's a dynamic, interactive course book that can be catalyst for a productive classroom atmosphere. It's *real*. We haven't dumbed down the issues. We've simplified the language of instruction

but not the topics – and that makes it challenging and truthful.

**John:** Thanks Paul.

**Paul:** You are welcome, and I'm so grateful to have had this chance to state my case. I really do think that there is a place for literature and culture in tertiary-level EFL, and it is unkind and disingenuous to deprive students of the marvelously varied,

meaningful, substantial, provocative and challenging content that great works of literature or candid, thoughtful writings about culture can offer. Thank you.

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## Reflection

So, we ask ourselves: what has changed? And the answer is: everything, but not much. I am still at Meiji Gakuin University, and still loving what I do there. I am still working on Iris Murdoch but wrote a critical monograph on Christina Rossetti along the way, fruit of a sabbatical year in 2014-15 (Hullah, 2016). The course I taught using pop lyrics became another textbook, *Rock UK* (Hullah & Teranishi, 2012), and both it and *Britain Today* are still in print and selling steadily. My former wife passed away, and I felt lost and marooned for a while, but I survived, and am now remarried and the happiest I have ever been. All is more than good with me. But what of poetry in EFL, you will ask? As Bowie so pointedly put it: where are we now?

Well, I still teach poetry at every available opportunity, and, though the L2 levels of some classes I teach are palpably lower than 12 years ago, I still believe “it ain't what you teach, it's the way that you teach it” (e.g., Bibby, 2012; Hullah, 2013). I come with more caveats and disclaimers these days, however—among the daily disappointments of aging arrives that liberating sense of being able to speak one's mind more freely—but with no less enthusiasm or certainty regarding the efficacy and usefulness of poetry in an EFL curriculum when sensitively, “suitably selected [and] properly presented” (Hullah, 2019, p. 122).

I would first say that “Less is more” has become my educator's mantra. That and, simply, “Be nicer”. Those two simple but profound imperatives have, I think, embodied the most useful, overdue, and now rigorously adopted sea changes in my classroom approach. Less is more: rather than whole poems or songs, I tend mainly to present potent extracts of British poetry and/or song lyrics in my classes now, in order to show language lovingly sculpted, and carefully, playfully, and most meaningfully put to use. This foregrounding of purposeful form and loaded rhetoric is crucial and

germane to the keen L2 learner because how something is expressed is as important as what is expressed. This is most clearly evident in “poetic” writing, of which what I now call “literary” texts are an example; good written poetry itself is the purest instance, with good song lyrics not all that far behind. This empowering quality is, I think, best conveyed by focusing closely on very short poems or on very short extracts from longer poems. With some context—historical, cultural, humanist—as a scaffolding preamble, I can do a whole class on just one line of poetry (“To be, or not to be, that is the question”; “Home is so sad. It stays as it was left”), demonstrating how specific word choice, imagery, lexical and grammatical gymnastics, wit (an undervalued item in the arsenal of utterance), and rhetorical competence combine deftly to enhance a meaning already present, or even to create new layers of readily-‘exportable’ meaning (a metaphor, conceit, phrase, line, or lines that a reader can take away and apply to his or her own life) in an already meaningful literary text.

And, while doing all that, I just try to be nicer: A teacher's generosity of spirit kindles learner enthusiasm and respect. The human side of what we do is neglected at our peril. The principles emphasised 200 years ago by the English Romantics—the importance of love, emotional intelligence, equality, empathy—are to me as star charts are to sailors, so I still begin there. Without empathy we are forever lost. These last two COVID-19 years, teaching mostly online, I have especially felt as much counsellor as educator. We have to look after each other better, and we had best look after ourselves so as most usefully to be able to do that.

I want students to be happy: that's a vital part of my remit. So I now give Japanese translations of the poems I use, to help them “get into” (in both senses: become engaged with, and become enamoured of) a poem at a basic level. Why not, as long as they then go back to the English, and stay with the English, but with

now more confidence? We then focus on specific words, lines, expressions, or images and discuss their purpose in context. Then the students personalise the text by thinking about, discussing, and answering open-ended questions I set them. Then we talk together and go back to the text, and I comment on their interpretations, comparing them with some of my own. A proactive and provocative strategy is to look at how a Japanese translator has rendered a particular line or image, and ask if there might be different ways to translate it, or if they missed something, or added something that wasn't there, and why.

Depending on the course, a parallel purpose of presenting poetry is to show how literary language is a repository of culture. Sensitively interpreted and properly deconstructed, poetry becomes a discursive open-ended (non-dogmatic) expression of identity: personal, psychological, social, sexual, and ontological. All these can be contained in the same text if analysed from differing theoretical perspectives. James Blunt's "You're Beautiful" from a feminist perspective: the male gaze, objectification/idealisation of female form, a woman allowed zero agency. Is it a creepy stalker's song, or perhaps ironic? "Every Breath You Take" by The Police is similar. I use both. Christina Rossetti's or Emily Brontë's poems, or lyrics by Siouxsie and the Banshees ("Happy House"; "Christine"), X-Ray Spex ("Identity"), The Slits ("Typical Girls"), and even The Spice Girls ("Wannabe"), are useful for subversion of the poetic patriarchy: female identity, challenging the stereotype, re-imagining the self. Online ads, movie clips, TV and magazine ads too, all invite rhetorical analysis, and the students seek out and introduce texts they deem to be similar or very different, and we/they discuss them too. For continuity within a 'pop' course, the Beatles are an obvious go-to text, but Bowie is a goldmine too: decades' worth of fecund lyrical agility dissecting spirituality, and self-expression (pop music) as a pseudo-religious salvation ('Starman', 'Let's Dance').

For my own mandated purpose (introducing British culture and well as literature: your geographies may vary), British poetry and song words can become a meaningful map of Britishness: socially reflective, always in flux, and full of allusions particular to period. Of course, we find this in Blake and the Romantics, Betjeman, and Larkin. Rock music is even more transparently so: The Who, The Sex Pistols, The Smiths, Morrissey ('We'll Let You Know'), Suede, Blur, and MIA ('Borders') all have wonderful lyrics that ventriloquize a disappearing Britishness, or hint at a

modern, multicultural Britishness redefined. This contrasts well with 19th-century music hall songs and the patriotic wartime ballads of Vera Lynn and Flanagan and Allen, which construct a very different national identity, albeit in a similarly emotive way. Rock music arose as a way for young people to express their identity, something that was their own in the neglected limbo land between so-called 'childhood and adulthood', and still does. Students can see themselves in it. (And British Rock music is consistently remarkable because of its close and complex relationship with the society that makes and consumes it). L2 learners can personalise a poem or a good rock lyric: it talks to them in ways that other teaching materials do not, and lets them locate and make meaning they have looked for elsewhere in vain.

To clarify, taking Romanticism as pivotal, as I did 12 years ago, I try even more than before to choose lexically straightforward poems and songs, which discuss and dissect ideas of self and identity in a humanist, emotive way. In terms of formal "canonical" poetry, the most modern I use is Hardy, Stevie Smith, Larkin, Heaney. I never "got" Ted Hughes, I'm afraid, but I know his work has its admirers. In my view, a lot of contemporary poetry is useless. It's all too often clumsy, inelegant, formless, and lacking in melody and wit, frequently bereft of any truly pioneering figurative or affective aspect. There is nothing more linguistically compelling than the poise and authority of truly perceptive poets calmly curating their turbulent feelings and skilfully shaping them into proper poems. That is so very pleasing to me and affects learners immeasurably. It is textually exceptional. Of course, we start with Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", but that is only the starting point: emotion is the "origin", but the poetry happens when those potent unshaped feelings are "recollected in tranquillity", and artfully, wittily, carefully, elegantly set down and sculpted into something polished and pristine.

Pop song lyrics are not the same as formal poetry, but they contain poetic aspects and are formally comparable. There are more usable meaningful pop lyrics than poems. They also tend to have other textual elements (performative aspect, accompanying visual packaging, official video) that the students enjoy and can fruitfully make meaning from. Ideally, two-thirds formal written poetry and one-third pop lyrics in a course is my plan. The idea is to show the students that the poetry and songs express emotions and ideas relevant to everyone: "what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed" as Pope insightfully wrote (Pope, 1711, p. 19).

But less is always more. If we try to do too much, the students get confused and stressed. I try to make three basic points per class, and if they understand only two of them, they've done well, and I've done well too. There are no finite answers: it's all descriptive, not prescriptive. If we can open them up to the beauty of language used elegantly and clearly, then that's enough. It empowers them. They need that. And always choose poems and songs that you like (but not only because you like them: make sure there are those aforementioned relatable 'exportable' meanings that learners can also enjoy). Observe William Morris's "golden rule: Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful" (Morris, 1882, p. 110). Find songs and poems that are useful and beautiful, and show the students why you believe that is so, and let them take it from there. Your passion will win them over. They like that.

To conclude, I (still) believe that properly overseen, guided analysis of appropriately picked, pruned, and processed literary texts can be of immeasurable benefit to L2 learners, linguistically empowering them in ways and directions that non-literary forms of discourse do not. Good writing endures for a reason. That is what (and why) literature is: it is "writing I want to remember... those particular words in that particular order" as John Carey incisively defined it, consciously (one hopes) echoing Coleridge (Carey, 2005, pp. 173-4; Coleridge, 1835, p. 48). We still study, enjoy, and learn about ourselves from Shakespeare today, over 400 years after he wrote. Why should an eye-opening meaningful rock song lyric be different? The role that all these texts play confirms the role that art plays: it holds a magic mirror to life, imaginatively and empathetically explaining us to ourselves, becoming what the Romantics took to be medicine for the soul (Haekel, 2011).

Poetry, in particular, alerts the attentive L2 reader to sophisticated possibilities, spotlighting the liberating *how* of competent L2 usage that matters once the *what* is in place. The *how* is part of the totality of meaning, so to be in control of this potent rhetorical element is roundly to be in charge of one's own original utterance. This is something that native speakers, dipping into the vast cultural/linguistic reservoir of allusion, connotation, nuance, and wit in which they are immersed and schooled since infancy, can do unconsciously. Non-natives have to learn it. Poetry is the perfect vehicle for facilitating this: consciously inviting us to read slowly and closely, benefitting from sustained analysis, and very

often reliant upon a specific linguistic trick for its singular impact. This special aspect (though not unique: it occurs in jokes and advertising too), wrought at the service of a conscious desire to emotionally connect, is the most consistent and important feature of poetic utterance. It is why I fell in love with certain words and songs and poems before I knew what they meant, and why, half a century later, I will continue to do what I do in my classrooms this year.

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