

APRIL 2006

# POETRY

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

Whether your book group is considering poetry for the first time or for the hundredth, you may find one of these ideas helpful. They are only suggestions. There is no right or wrong way to talk about a poem.

## READ THE POEMS ALOUD

Read a poem with no further discussion.

Take turns reading one poem aloud.

*After the first reading, ask each participant to name a word or phrase that stands out.*

*After the second reading, ask each participant to name an image that stands out.*

*After the third reading, ask each participant to react to the poem as a whole.*

If you've passed out the issues ahead of time, ask each participant to choose a favorite (or most hated) poem to read aloud to the group. Introduce each poem by explaining the reasons for choosing it.

---

## WHAT ARE THE POEMS ABOUT?

Almost every poem in this issue can be reduced to a prose statement; that is, you can say what each poem is about (some are more difficult in this regard than others, admittedly). Hédi Kaddour's "Jean-Paul de Dadelsen" is particularly difficult. It is almost impossible to separate *what* is being said in this poem from *how* it's being said. Is this a weakness or a strength? How do you respond to a poem like this? (Hint: read it aloud several times.) In Marilyn Hacker's translator's note, she tells us that the title refers to the poet Jean-Paul de Dadelsen and that this poem is Kaddour's response to Dadelsen's life and work. Given this, who is the "you" in the poem? What is the speaker's attitude toward this "you"? What is your opinion of this person? What feeling are you left with at the end of the poem?

Hédi Kaddour's "Jean-Paul de Dadelsen," the anonymous "Pangur Bán," Gabriel Preil's "The Power of a Question," Ilya Kutik's "Hunchback," and Jorge Luis Borges's "That One" might all be said to be, in one way or another, "about" poetry or the making of art.

Discuss these poems and read the accompanying translators' notes in that context. What similar things are they saying about the making of art? What different things? Which are you more drawn to and why?

---

### HOW DO THE POEMS MEAN?

Gionvanni Pascoli's poem "In the Fog" is written in traditional Italian *terza rima* (the first and last lines of each three-line stanza rhyme, and the middle line rhymes with the first and last lines of the following stanza). Stéphane Mallarmé's "The Tomb of Edgar Poe" and Robert Desnos's "The Landscape" are both sonnets. "Road," by Ileana Malancioiu, is written in neat quatrains where the second and fourth lines rhyme. In George Seferis's "Upon a Line of Foreign Verse," the lines in each couplet rhyme, but each line varies wildly in length. Discuss why each poem might have demanded its particular form. What is being expressed formally apart from or in addition to the meaning of the words themselves?

Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib's "Twilight in Delhi," Saadi Youssef's "Occupation 1943," Sayyid Abdallah Bin Ali Bin Nasir's "The Inkishafi," and Antjie Krog's "New Alphabet" are all about political strife, but they approach their subjects in very different ways. Discuss the differences between these poems first of all—the types of language, narrative movements, characterizations, images, specificity of detail, tone. Then discuss why they are so different and what particular effects each is aiming at.

Think of the complex syntax and surreal imagery of Hédi Kaddour's "Jean-Paul de Dadelsen" or Ilya Kutik's "Hunchback." Now think of the relatively simple statements and straightforward images of the anonymous "The Sheets" or "Little Soul," by Hadrian. Most of the other poets fall somewhere in between. Where would you place each one? Which poems, and which end of the spectrum, are you most drawn to? Why? Can you see the virtues in the other way of writing? The dangers?

## HOW DO THE POETS SEE THEMSELVES?

Bertolt Brecht's "Of Poor B.B.," Ottó Orbán's "Fifteen Songs," and Ruby Rahman's "I Didn't Keep My Word" all have a very intimate tone; they make you feel as if the poet is speaking directly to you about him or herself. Why do you think that these poets would choose to speak on such familiar terms? Is their familiarity earnest? How does your impression of who the poet is as a person affect how you respond to their poems?

A poem like Stéphane Mallarmé's "The Tomb of Edgar Poe" could be said to be a much more "public" poem. Who is the intended audience of this poem? How is the language in this poem different from those above and why? Do you think this sort of poem is more or less useful than a poem that seems to be about the poet's self?

---

## WHAT IS TRANSLATABLE?

Don Paterson calls his translation of Robert Desnos's "The Landscape" a "version" because he has taken liberties with the original text in order to transform it into a poem that stands up in English. How would you characterize the speech in this poem? What about this poem might make it difficult to translate literally? How would you describe the speaker's attitude toward love? Are the emotions that he describes universal, or are they more "poetic" than what most people feel?

Many of the translators' notes in this issue refer to the difficulty of translation, and many refer in one way or another to Robert Frost's view that "poetry is what is lost in translation." Reading Aleksandar Hemon's translator's note, are you inclined to agree or disagree with Frost? How does the language that we speak affect our understanding of ourselves?

A PUBLICATION OF THE  
POETRY FOUNDATION

---

*Poetry* • April 2006 • Volume 188 • Number 1