

By Heart

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Stephen McInerney on our lost ability to memorise poetry.

Within living memory, one mark of a modestly educated man was his ability to recite poetry. In Australia, the poems recited were usually the bush ballads of A.B. ‘Banjo’ Paterson or Henry Lawson, or the sonnets of Shakespeare or the famous speeches from the plays, or, in Catholic circles, perhaps the rollicking ballads of G.K. Chesterton and Francis Thompson’s anxious but exhilarating “The Hound of Heaven.” A generation earlier, as Les Murray has discussed, many Australians of Scottish ancestry, even those without the benefit of schooling, could recite from memory the poetry of Robbie Burns, whose work was not only the expression of a rich culture but also one of the ties that held that culture together. More modestly, one could still encounter until relatively recently children who knew by heart the nursery rhymes of Mother Goose. Today, however, with few exceptions, this distinctive feature of our cultural life – one shared with many cultures, old and new – has more or less been eroded. Children are no longer expected to commit poetry to memory – once a common discipline at primary and secondary schools – and the days when verse and song were learnt with pleasure from the lips of parents and village elders, around the piano or fire, are not even a distant memory. There are many reasons for this. C.S. Lewis, who was known to begin a tutorial with a new student by asking him to recite his favourite poem, blamed the demise of popular poetry, in part at least, on the Modernist movement in literature. It was T.S. Eliot after all who said that poetry in the modern age had to be difficult, thereby making it the preserve of a coterie of experts and practitioners, rather than part of the perennial wisdom available to all. Others believe that the function of poetry has simply been replaced by popular music, just as TV dramas and movies now largely fulfil the function once reserved to the theatre. Whatever the reasons, more has been lost than simply the ability to recall lines of verse. Gone, too, are the formal beauty and the wisdom they embody, as well as their beneficial side effects, one of which was to give to the person who had absorbed them models of beautiful language to be imitated, adapted and applied in the formation of his or her own written and spoken speech. The poems are still there, of course, in books, waiting to be picked up and joined to our minds, bodies and hearts, and – once we have made them part of ourselves by memorising them – to be passed on to others in the dance of the generations. For the ancients, the art of memory, the ability to recall at will lines from the great poems, plays and histories was a sign of an integrated personality. In the Phaedrus, we find Socrates deeply suspicious of his interlocutor who is reduced to carrying ‘knowledge’ in a scroll rather than in his heart. The great philosopher understood that in a real sense remembered speech allows the truth embodied by it to continue to exercise its influence in the heart of its recipient long after the initial encounter. The expression “by heart” is worth looking at, since it has profound implications. As always, an example from the spiritual life may help. In the Eastern Church, a major sign of progress in the contemplative life is that the “Jesus Prayer”, known also as the “Prayer of the Heart”, has passed from the lips into the heart of the praying man or woman, becoming almost inseparable from the one who has absorbed its meaning. It is a sign of the ‘Christification’ of the individual. Here we see that the repetition of an exhortation – ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner’ – is seen to transform the whole person. Leaving aside the theological nuances of this example, the analogy is clear: just as the ingestion of the Word transforms us, so too do words more generally, as whole phrases and verses become part of who we are. The many benefits of memorising great examples of structured language (and poetry especially, which by virtue of devices such as rhyme and rhythm is the easiest to retain in the memory) are not only demonstrated by thousands of years of pedagogical theory and practice; they are also confirmed by scientific research. A recent bestseller, *The Brain that Changes Itself* by Norman Doidge M.D., demonstrates that among other activities the act of memorising verse exercises the brain and actually facilitates its growth and affects its shape. In other words, if you take the time to memorise poems, you not only advance yourself intellectually but also, in a sense, physically, for poetry is a physical as well as a spiritual medium. Donald Hall calls it a “bodily pleasure, a deliciousness of the senses”, while Les Murray goes beyond this to argue that “the sacramental is the body…it’s the mystery of embodiment… and words form a body called a poem”. The time has come then to return to poetry and to the art of memorising it. While there are many lofty and weighty reasons for this, some of which have been discussed above, one reason overwhelms them all: it is great fun. Indeed, there are few finer pleasures in this life than lingering over a bottle of wine, in the company of good friends, reciting cherished lines of verse – “the best words in the best order”, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s timeless expression. Dr Stephen McInerney is Lecturer in Literature at Campion College Australia