

# READING POETRY IN ENGLISH

## THREE DEFINITIONS

Semantics, internal meanings,  
external meanings

## SLOW READING

Four lines

## SCHOLARS ON POETRY

Resource pack by Tomasz Wiśniewski

Editor: Małgorzata Woźniak (AMU)

Visual identification:

Weronika Żołędziowska

Coordinators: Ewelina Stefańska,

Małgorzata Woźniak

and Paulina Niedzielska

Academic board:

Katarzyna Kręglewska (UG),

David Malcolm (SWPS),

Agnieszka Pantuchowicz (SWPS),

Tomasz Wiśniewski (UG).

Concept of the Between.Education  
program: Tomasz Wiśniewski

Cover and other images: Jon

McKenna in "Beckett on the Baltic"  
by S.E. Gontarski.

Photographs by Artur Karwat.

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**UNDERLINED TEXTS AND IMAGES ATTACHED TO THEM PROVIDE LINKS TO AUDIO-VISUAL MATERIALS.  
EXTERNAL LINKS MARKED**



**AND**





# Introduction

Reading poetry is by definition a slightly different task than scrolling screens, and other forms of daily reading. It simply takes time, and is perhaps the best exercise in **slow reading**. At times it is difficult, at times challenging, nearly always time-consuming, but at the same time reading poetry is rewarding in many ways. Reading poetry proves that communication is not necessarily as obvious as it may seem. Even most ordinary words are capable of taking on **unexpected meanings**, and echoing sounds, rhythms, and rhymes may contribute to putting what we know in a new light. It is always intriguing to observe poetic devices in everyday contexts, such as memes, advertisements, social media, and so on.

Reading poetry in English may be even more puzzling for those who are not native speakers of the language. But at the same time it may be even more **rewarding**. For the past twelve years, *Between.Pomiędzy* has explored reading poetry in a variety of contexts. We've delivered lectures, published articles and books, and gathered scholars from various parts of the world. We've invited poets to read and discuss poems written by them, and others. We've talked to translators. They have offered workshops to students. We've **visited a number of schools** to talk about poets and their poetry. In 2021, we've decided to search for ways in which it is possible to share a fascination with **reading poetry via the internet**. This chapter is the first in a sequence of resource packs that focus on reading poetry by: Mimi Khalvati, Paula Meehan, David Constantine, Elizabeth Bishop, and Bob Dylan.



# Return to form

Between.Pomiędzy is attentive to the importance of form, structure, and aesthetics in reading poetry. Even if this approach is not taken for granted by everyone, we think there are good reasons for exploring the specificity of poetic language. This is, after all, exactly what distinguishes poetry from other forms of communication. In 2013, we asked Professor **Derek Attridge**, one of the leading literary scholars from the UK, about what he thinks is most important to literary studies in the 21st century. His answer was quite instructive:

“I think the best we can do is to discern writers who seem to pursue today, using the language in order to open up new vistas, **new horizons of thought and feelings**, and to do the best we can to engage with them, including inviting them to talk about other issues, which is often very interesting. [...] It is a bit messy, because we all have different likes and dislikes. But often when I hear somebody talk about a writer I have not read, I go back home and feel I have to read that writer’s work. Then, I can make **my own judgement**. It may be negative, I might think, ‘oh, that was a waste of time,’ but on the other hand, I might discover a whole new body of work that is important. I can’t think of any more organised way of doing it, it’s a hit or miss thing. But we just need to keep having **conversations**, keep sharing with each other the **discoveries** we make, and, as you do here in Sopot, bring writers to talk to critics, because that is implicit in what I was saying earlier: one of the problems about the academic literary study is this divorce between what writers are doing and what critics are doing.”

(Derek Attridge, *Stories for the Future. A Between Almanach for the Year 2015*)

# "Tricity"

Although most of the events organised within the framework of Between.Pomiędzy take place in the so-called "Tricity" we are eager to collaborate with schools from other parts of Poland, and institutions from various parts of the world.

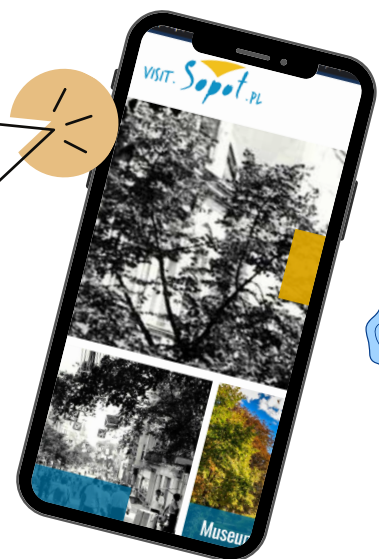
**Sopot.** Situated between Gdańsk and Gdynia, Sopot is a popular resort in Northern Poland. Inhabited by about 40,000 people, it is visited by hundreds of thousands every year. Main tourist attractions include: the pier, the Forest Opera, the Grand Hotel, and the lighthouse. Sopot was granted city rights in 1901. Between World War I and II, it was part of the Free City of Danzig. Many events organized by Between.Pomiędzy take place in Sopot, in particular in Teatr Boto.

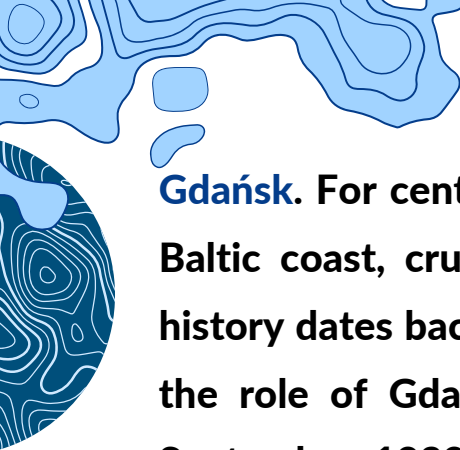
Photographs of Sopot at the time of pandemic.



[boto.art.pl](http://boto.art.pl)

[visit.sopot.pl](http://visit.sopot.pl)





**Gdańsk.** For centuries, Gdańsk was one of the main port cities on the Baltic coast, crucial for Polish mercantile relations with Europe. Its history dates back to the 10th century, and you are probably aware of the role of Gdańsk in World War II (this is where it began on 1 September 1939), and in the formation of the Solidarity movement (the trade union that challenged the communist regime in the 1980s). Inhabited by nearly half million people, Gdańsk is the cultural centre of Pomerania, and it hosts theatres, galleries, museums, and other tourist attractions. The Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre was opened in 2014. The main campus of the University of Gdańsk is located in the district of Oliwa.

- [www.gdansk.pl](http://www.gdansk.pl)
- [en.ug.edu.pl](http://en.ug.edu.pl)
- [teatrszekspirowski.pl](http://teatrszekspirowski.pl)



**Gdynia.** Labelled “a pearl of modernism on the Baltic,” Gdynia rapidly developed from a fishing village into a major Polish port and industrial centre after the Treaty of Versailles returned it to Poland. Until the outbreak of World War II, it grew in prominence in the proximity of the Free City of Danzig. At present, Gdynia offers many interesting cultural centres such as The Musical Theatre, Gdynia Film Centre, and The Emigration Museum. It also hosts major Polish film, drama, and poetry festivals and awards.

- [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com)
- [whc.unesco.org](http://whc.unesco.org)
- [muzyczny.org](http://muzyczny.org)

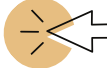


# Nine poets for today

Among the poets that we've hosted, translated, and published, the work of the following will be discussed in this chapter:

- **Ian Brown** has published three collections of poems: *Poems for Joan* (2001), *Lions' Milk: Turkish Poems by Scottish Poets* (with Alan Riach) (2012), and *Collyshangles in the Canopy* (2015). He is also a playwright and a widely published writer on theatre and culture.
- **Elizabeth Burns** was a poet, and teacher of creative writing at Lancaster University. She was brought up in Edinburgh. Her poetry collections include: *Ophelia, and other poems*, *The Gift of Light*, and *Held*.
- **Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin** is an Irish poet, who is a founder of the literary magazine *Cyphers* and a Fellow of Trinity College Dublin.
- **Michael Edwards** is a poet and holds the Chair in the Study of Literary Creation in the English Language at the Collège de France in Paris. He is a member of the Académie française.
- **David Kennedy** was a poet, and Senior Lecturer in English and Creative Writing at the University of Hull, UK.
- **Tatenda Matsvai** is a vocal poet and performer who was born in Zimbabwe and lives in London.
- **Alan Riach** is Professor of Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow. He is the author of six volumes of poetry and studies of the work of Hugh MacDiarmid.
- **Suzanne Walsh** is a poet, visual artist, and performer who lives in Dublin, Ireland. She is a resident artist at the Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin.
- **Joshua Weiner** is a poet, and the poetry editor at *Tikkun* magazine. He teaches at the University of Maryland, USA.

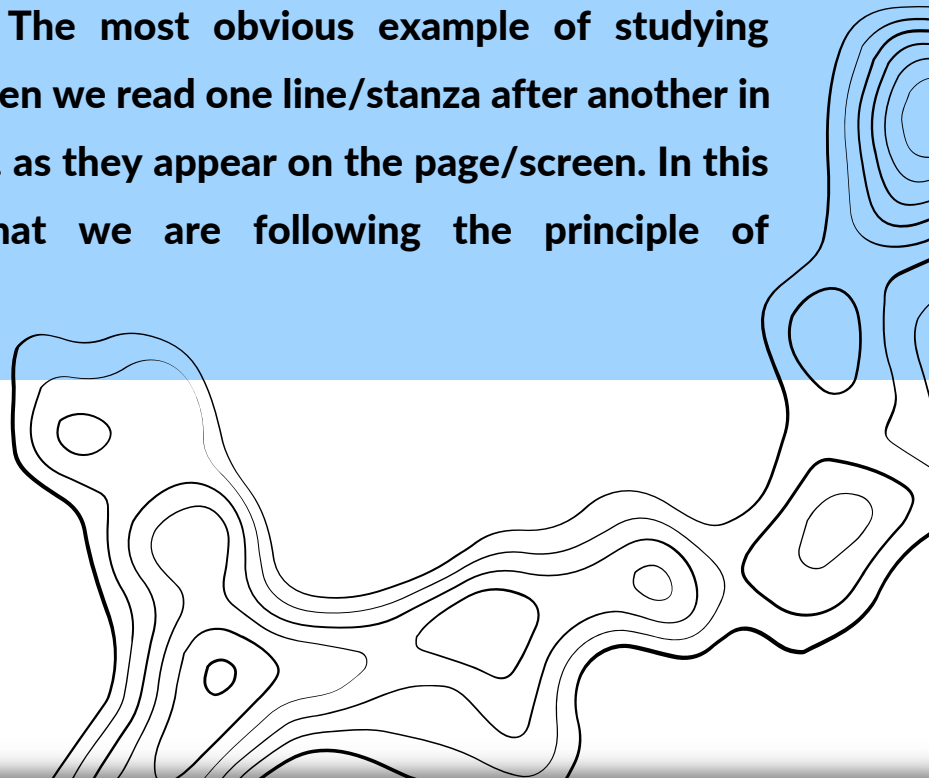
# Three definitions

- **Semantics.** The study of meaning and various forms of its creation.
  - [dictionary.cambridge.org](https://dictionary.cambridge.org) 
  - [www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com)
- **Internal meanings.** It is sometimes argued that in poetry each compositional unit – such as a line or a stanza – creates autonomous meaning that is independent of the context in which it appears. What is vital is its sonic integrity, formal functionality, and original meaning (one may say: semantics). In practical terms, this means that when reading poetry, we need to be particularly attentive to details and particularities, because they may be decisive for challenging obvious senses. This rule is also true in songs and other forms of art. Perhaps you may think of a song line – a refrain – that you remember, even if the remaining lyrics are obscure? Or perhaps a scene from a film is embedded in your memory even if you don't remember the entire action? If this is the case, it's quite probable that in this refrain, this image, internal meanings are exceptionally integral.





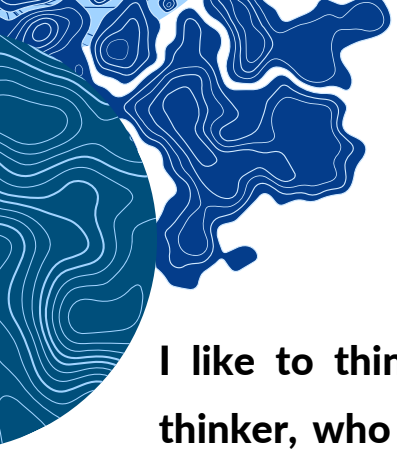
- **External meanings.** In this case we concentrate on the meaning that emerges from relations of one compositional unit – a line, a stanza – with other parts of the text. It may be that we compare one stanza with another or put together rhyming lines and contrast them with other rhyming lines. The possibilities are unlimited, but it is important to find motivation for any procedures undertaken within the text itself. The most obvious example of studying external meanings is when we read one line/stanza after another in a sequential manner, i.e. as they appear on the page/screen. In this case, we may say that we are following the principle of sequentiality.



# Slow reading: four lines

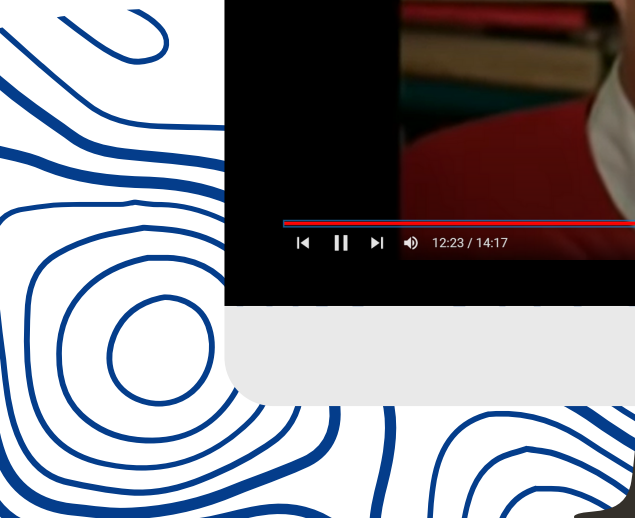
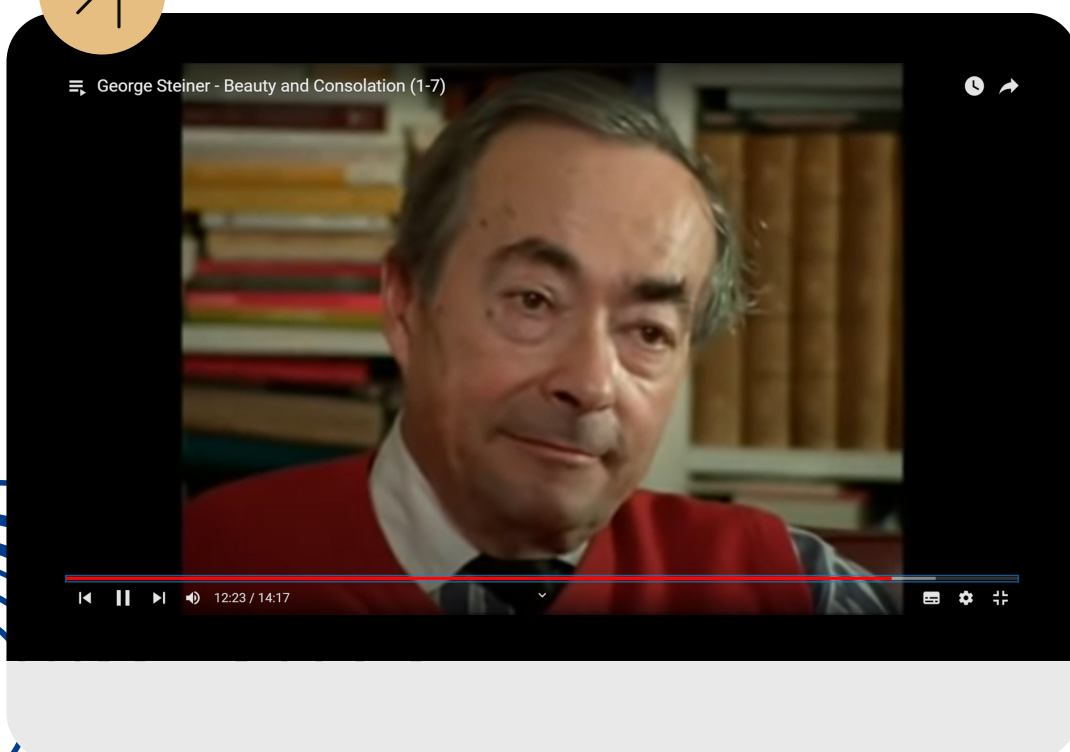
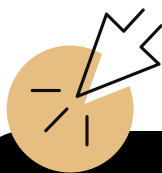
Most of these lines have been selected from poems that were published in *Stories for the Future. A Between Almanach for the Year 2015*. Read six years later, they still strike with their exceptional power and beauty. It is, of course, a **random and subjective choice**, and yet I attempt to justify my decision to select these rather than others by arguing that each reveals a particular integrity of internal meanings. If you wish to read the whole poems in which the discussed lines appear – and in this way to check external meanings they create – follow the link to the *Almanach* that is provided in the **Between.Publication** section below. The book is available in the Open Access format.

Attentive reading of these lines is meant to stress the **unpredictability** of reading poetry. Confronted with no more than a single line, the reader needs to suspend his/her expectations and knowledge, so as to attentively contemplate what is being communicated here and now. Contextualisation is certainly a valuable method of reading, but in this situation it is not decisive for the semantics. There are certain words, a sequence of sounds, strong and weak syllables, and a variety of poetic devices that may be of particular use at the given moment. Derek Attridge argues in one of his books that what is of greatest value is the notion of “**singularity of literature.**” By this he means specific, intimate, and individual response of a particular reader to a certain literary text, at the given moment of his or her life.



I like to think in this context of George Steiner, a great post-war thinker, who spoke about the physical feeling of wonder mixed with terror when as a child he realised that “Every leaf on every tree is different. Every blade of grass may be different from every other blade. Every drop of water has a universe of its own.” Perhaps, when **contemplating slow reading of individual lines** – in particular of those that appeal to our inner self without any obvious reasons – we may experience anew a fleeting sense of the individual, of the personal, of the **unexpected**. And this, I think, may well justify the reader’s efforts to pursue the paths offered by poets. As happens with any adventure, embarking on the journey of reading poetry is risky and leaves you **vulnerable** as much it is worthwhile.

**See: *Beauty and Consolation* (especially after 12:23)**



# One.

“Just looking at the map in the long cold corridor”

(Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin “Somewhere called Goose Bay”)

This is the opening line of a poem by the Irish female poet Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. It enlivens visual imagery, as the only activity mentioned is “**looking**.” The very word is nicely echoed in the later part of the line when the central image of the “**long** cold corridor” is mentioned, as if to stress the duration of this long look, on the one hand, and of the length of the sonic dimension of the poetic line, on the other. Something interesting is happening to the interweaving sounds, and this is true not only when we put together “**l**ooking / **l**ong / **co**ld” but also when we contemplate the precision of the final alliterative phrase “**co**ld **co**ridor” (note the repetition of [k] and [d]). There is one more element of the created image – “the map” – a short, one syllable word which consists of three sounds, none of which is ever repeated within the opening line. Internal integration is achieved here through echoing sounds that strongly pronounce its final part (“the long cold corridor”), and contrast it with the motif of “the map.” All this is described by someone that is “Just looking,” probably the speaker. And yet, it’s difficult not to notice the strong opening with the informal word “Just.” Among the questions that appear at this starting point, the one demanding an explanation for contrasting “the map” and “the long cold corridor” is certainly of considerable importance. And why is the corridor cold? Is it winter?

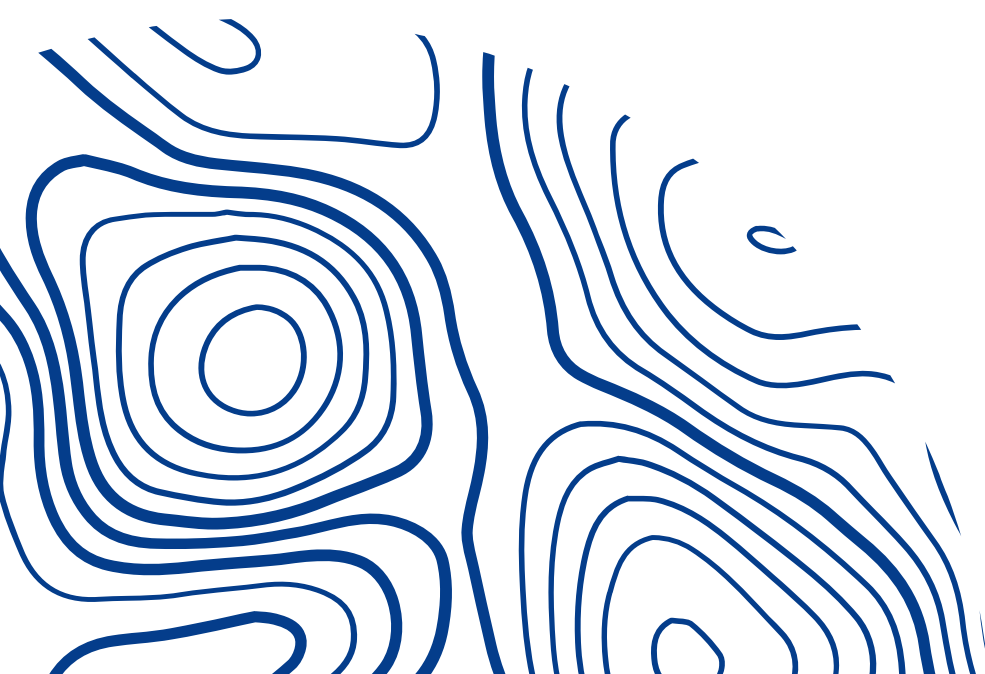


## Two.

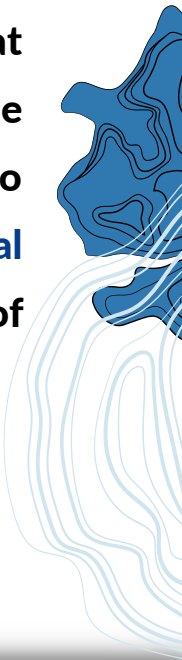
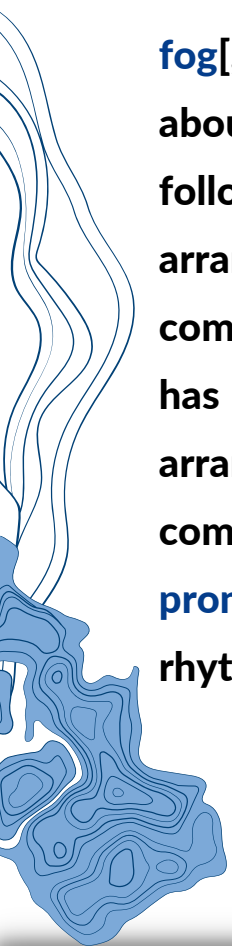
“his youth, yield, luck, the law, his fear, the fog, his name”

(Joshua Weiner, “The Figure of a Man Being Swallowed by a Fish”)

American poet Joshua Weiner provides here a **lengthy enumeration**. Part of a longer sentence, it describes a man (“his”) in twelve one-syllable words, the majority of which are nouns (seven). Alliteration abounds (“youth / yield,” “luck / law,” “fear / fog”), as do repetitions of the pronoun “his” (three times: “his youth/ law/ name”) and the definite article “the” (twice: “the law/ fog”). Why are particular words put together? Isn’t it simply sonic extravaganza? You should certainly make sure the **meaning of each word** is clear to you (*Oxford Learners Dictionaries*: “yield - the total amount of crops, profits, etc. that are produced”). It is possible that the opening of the line accumulates less confusing motifs than the ending (“youth / yield / luck / law” vs “fear / fog”). But, then, why does “his name” appear at the end? And if “the law” hints at a well-ordered legal system, it may be at the same time an expression of fear. So there is more than a contrast between the two notions. More questions than answers appear in this **confusing line**.



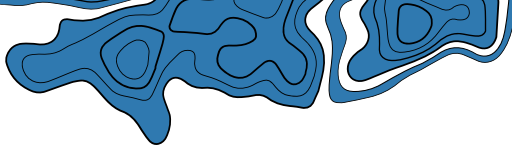
And yet there is some sort of arrangement that is decisive for its regularity, and this is established by **the rhythm**. Read the line aloud and let the strong / weak syllables and pauses [,] be articulated with their entire power: “his **youth**[,] **yield**[,] **luck**[,] the **law**[,] his **fear**[,] the **fog**[,] his **name**.” In terms of rhythmic organization we may speak here about an iamb, a metrical foot consisting of two syllables, a weak one followed by strong. Confusing as the line is, at least its rhythmic arrangement brings consolation. When we read the entire poem, it comes as a surprise that line 34 – this fragmentary enumeration that has been discussed – constitutes an entire stanza. This double arrangement is exceptional in Weiner’s poem. By meeting two compositional levels (line and stanza), the line is given **additional prominence**. Does it suggest we should contemplate contrasts of rhythmic regularity and semantic confusion in the entire poem?



# Three.

“Travel the line a hundred times;”  
(Ian Brown, “Deermageddon”)

Another opening line, this time from a poem by Ian Brown from Scotland. The motif of a **journey** is introduced, together with a sense of routine, and direct contact between the speaker and a listener. This invocation is clear in terms of literal meaning, which owes a lot to the fact that a coherent part of the sentence finishes at the end of the line with a **strong pause** marked by a semicolon. The meaning is exact and does not leave much space for confusion. Yet, because we are dealing here with an opening of a **poem**, there emerges another possibility of understanding the phrase. It is not infrequent for poets to use the metaphor of a journey so as to refer to the **process of reading**, as if poetic communication equalled travelling through a textual territory. This possibility is made even stronger once we realise the double meaning of the word “line.” When understood as a **poetic line**, the opening invites the reader to travel the line “a hundred times,” to explore its nuances and details, to contemplate the awkward precision of its double semantics. In this case, we may speak of self-referential function. The line draws the reader’s attention to the theme of poetry, and this is a kind of communication in which **repetitive slow reading** may be a value in itself.



When reading the line aloud we may arrive at a conclusion that its strong and weak syllables are arranged in an intriguing, yet not monotonous way. Three iambic feet (unstressed syllable followed by stressed) are preceded by one trochee, in which the situation is reversed (stressed syllable followed by unstressed).

“Travel / the **line** / a **hund** / red **times**;”

Note an interesting analogy between Ian Brown’s “Deermageddon” and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” a modernist classic by **T.S. Eliot** (it is probably one of the most important poems published in English; it appeared in 1915). The opening line is here also an invocation in which the speaker invites the listener/reader to walk through a poetic world. The famous first line reads:

“**Let us go then, you and I,**”

[Read the entire poem by T.S. Eliot here.](#)



[You may also listen to the poet reading the poem.](#)





# Four.

“into the garden. Your sister and her best friend”

(Elizabeth Burns, “Birthday”)

The eighth line of Elizabeth Burn’s poem “Birthday” is emphatically divided into two parts. The full stop formulates a strong pause and clearly detaches the natural language of the poem (English) from the line composition. But there is still clear **consistency in the constructed image**, spread between the motifs of “the garden,” “your sister,” and “her best friend.” Four people involved (the siblings, your sister’s friend, and the speaker) are involved in close non-problematic relations. This positive element is further affirmed by the motif of “the garden,” which always suggests utopian possibilities. The only movement implied is that of **getting into** rather than being expelled. Even though there is no explicit arrangement of the sonic material, and the line composition is challenged by the syntax, one may observe interesting consistency in **accumulating positive associations** on spatial (“into the garden”), family (“your sister”), and interpersonal (“her best friend”) planes. All this contributes to the sense of **intimate communication** between the speaker and the addressee. This celebratory mood is further reflected by the title of the poem, which, as we know, is “Birthday.”

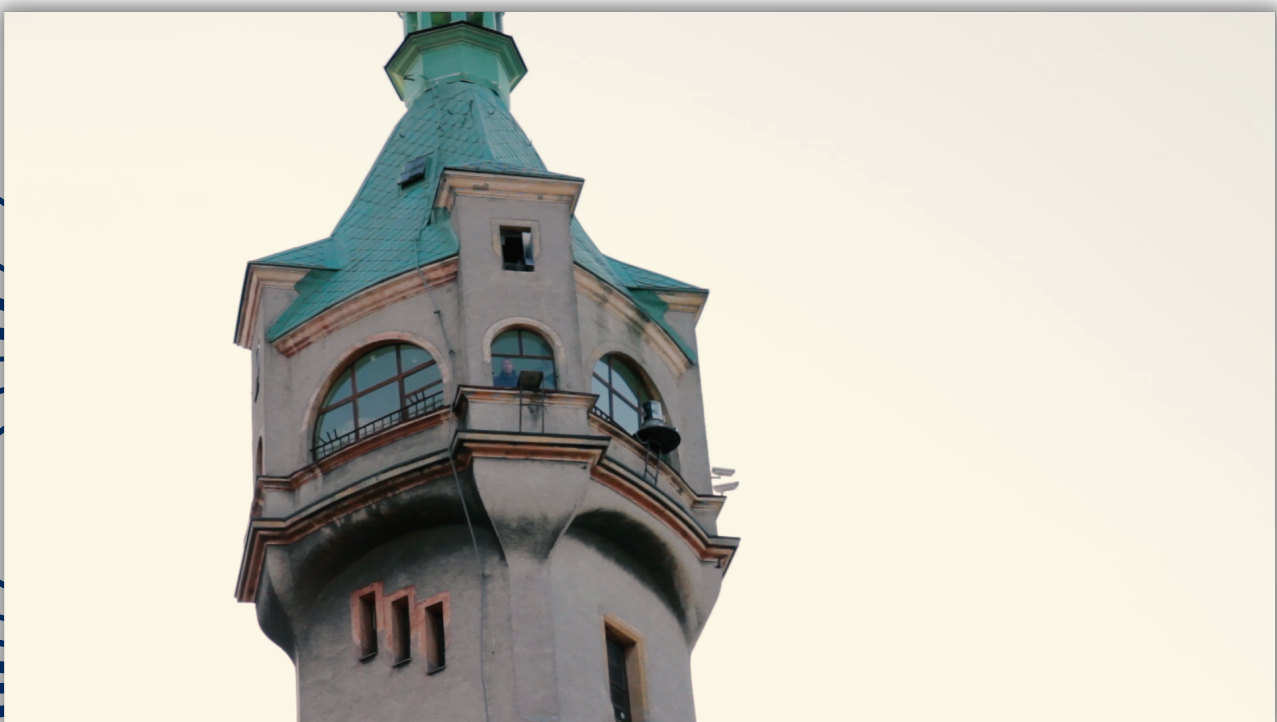
# Two stanzas

One.

“in the open air  
or pre-dawn clouds  
evaporating  
as the sun hits”

(David Kennedy, “Cezanne at Les Trois Sautets”)

Even a provisional glance at this stanza shows that David Kennedy wants to stress its visual **independence** from the restrictions of everyday language. Each line delivers a short phrase, and each is different and yet somehow similar. There are neither punctuation marks nor capital letters and the phrases disobey **graphic conventions of writing**. Perhaps this is to reflect the subject matter. After all, the main motifs revolve around the fluctuating freedom of “the open air,” “pre-dawn clouds,” and “evaporation.” It is “the sun” that is a decisive power up there above us as it “hits.” Some **tension** arises between these extremes: “in the open air” and “as the sun hits.”



Two.

“They step over the threshold, outer to inner, inner to outer,  
they ward off the darkness, they are bringers of light  
to this world – its dazzling confusions, its crystal certainties.”  
(Paula Meehan, “Crossing the Threshold” 23rd May 2020)

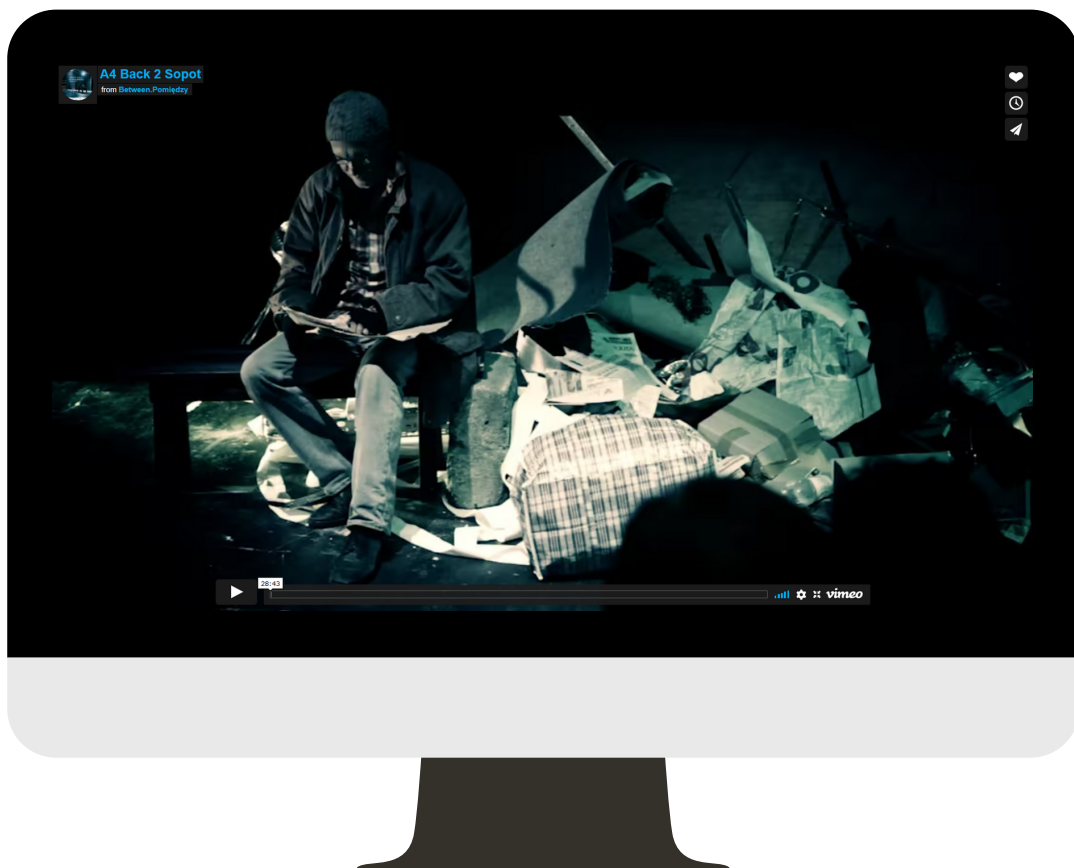
This final tercet (a three line stanza) of a recent poem by Paula Meehan – written at the time of the pandemic – echoes its title. The central image is that of “stepping over the threshold,” and we soon realise that an **ambiguous movement** in two directions leads to a more and more capacious metaphor. It is suggested that “they” – we learn in earlier stanzas that the speaker refers here to nurses, closely related with her by family bonds (“nieces”) – ward off external darkness as “bringers of light.” In this context, the contrast between outer darkness and inner light hints at the struggle between **death and life**. The light inner part of the image is equal with “this world,” but it is immediately endowed with two contradictory features (“dazzling **confusions**” vs “**crystal certainties**”). Note the striking alliteration that links two contrasted words. The central metaphor is based on **spatial category of inclusion**, with “them/nurses” being capable of crossing between extremes: life and death, light and darkness, this world and the one beyond the threshold, inner and outer worlds, and, finally, between “dazzling confusions,” and “crystal certainties.”

[You will find a more detailed discussion on Paula Meehan's poetry in Chapter 7](#)



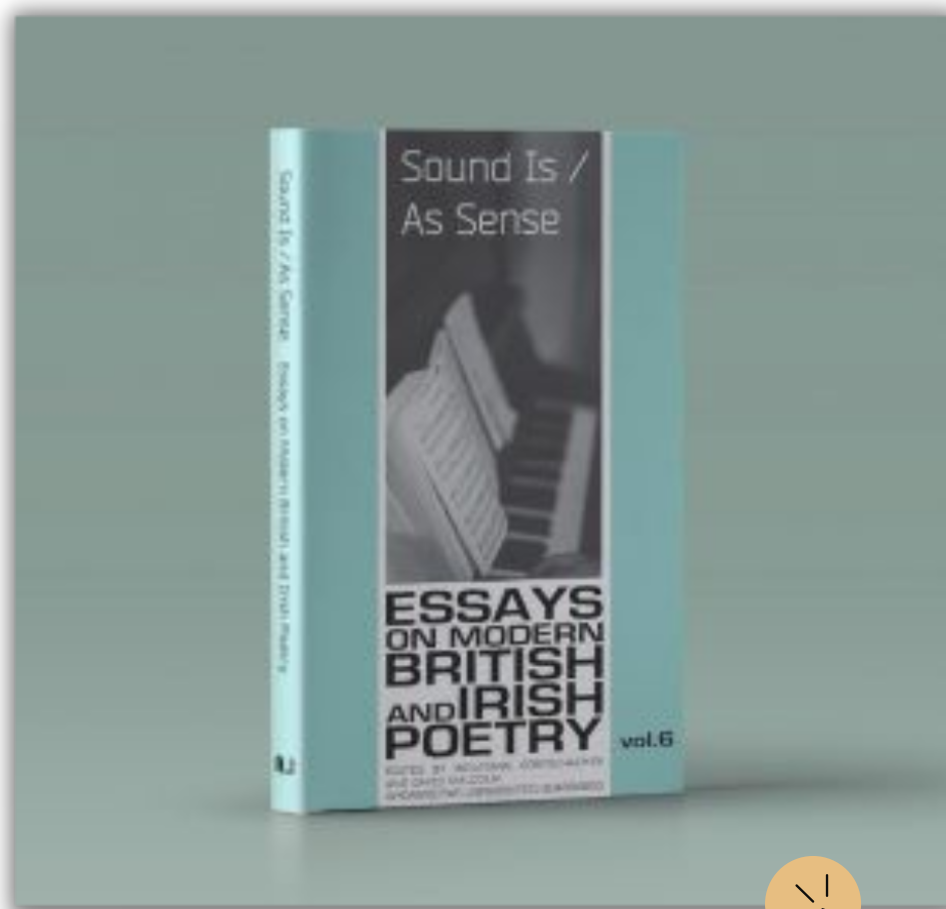
# Back 2 Sopot

This is a documentary impression produced by the visual artist Elvin Flamingo. It was inspired by the Back 2 Sopot festival that we organised in 2011, when poets and theatre makers from various countries were invited to exchange their ideas here in Sopot. The documentary illustrates unprepared interaction between separate events.



# Scholars on poetry

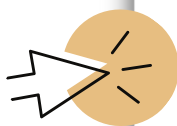
The following quotations come from the book *Sound Is/As Sense* that was edited by Wolfgang Görtschacher and David Malcolm, as part of the series: *Essays on Modern British and Irish Poetry* that was published by the University of Gdańsk Press. What is explained here are the reasons why we think that sounds and meanings are so closely bound together in the poetic language. If you want to learn more about British and Irish poets, this book, or the entire series conceived by David Malcolm, may be a good starting point. These are academic publications.



- “It is, of course, very difficult to prove an absence. However, let us suggest that although the contemporary discussion of contemporary poetry is complex and valuable, there is a **tendency to avoid the technical**. There is a disposition among commentators to talk of the contextual and the thematic, but not what one might call the formal or the technical aspects of poetry.” (Wolfgang Görtschacher and David Malcolm, *Sound Is/As Sense: Introduction*)
- “Testing what happens between sense and sound, the poet highlights **the musicality**, thus turning to the very origins of poetry.” (Monika Szuba, “‘Little tongues of life’: David Constantine’s Sustained Associations between the Sound and the Sense”)
- “The **auditory imagination**: the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end.” (T. S. Eliot, quoted by Jean Ward, “‘Be quiet and listen, listen.’ Sound, Rhythm and the Paradoxes of History and Faith in Elizabeth Jennings’ Poetry”)

- “In literature, an arrangement of sounds is always a primary factor in the creation of meaning. Subject to principles of a natural language, **sound orchestration** substantially increases both semantic and aesthetic capacity by establishing additional (i.e. non-linguistic) syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations with the whole variety of textual levels. Most typically, the patterning of sounds necessitates a scrupulous **scrutiny of poetic details** and thus substantially contributes to the enlivening of what Roman Jakobson called the **poetic function**. In this sense, sound orchestration is one of the distinguishing features of poetry – it helps us appreciate the exceptionality of the poetic language.” (Tomasz Wiśniewski, “On Methods of Meaning Creation through Sound Orchestration.”)

**SEE ALSO**



A COMPANION TO  
**CONTEMPORARY  
BRITISH AND IRISH  
POETRY, 1960–2015**

EDITED BY  
WOLFGANG GÖRTSCHACHER  
AND DAVID MALCOLM

WILEY Blackwell

# Further explorations

These links may be useful:

- [poetryarchive.org](https://poetryarchive.org)
- [www.poetryireland.ie](https://www.poetryireland.ie)
- [literature.britishcouncil.org](https://literature.britishcouncil.org)
- [www.poemhunter.com](https://www.poemhunter.com)
- [poets.org](https://poets.org)



## Vocal Poetry

[Tatenda Matsvai](#)  
and vocal poetry  
of her group Transit



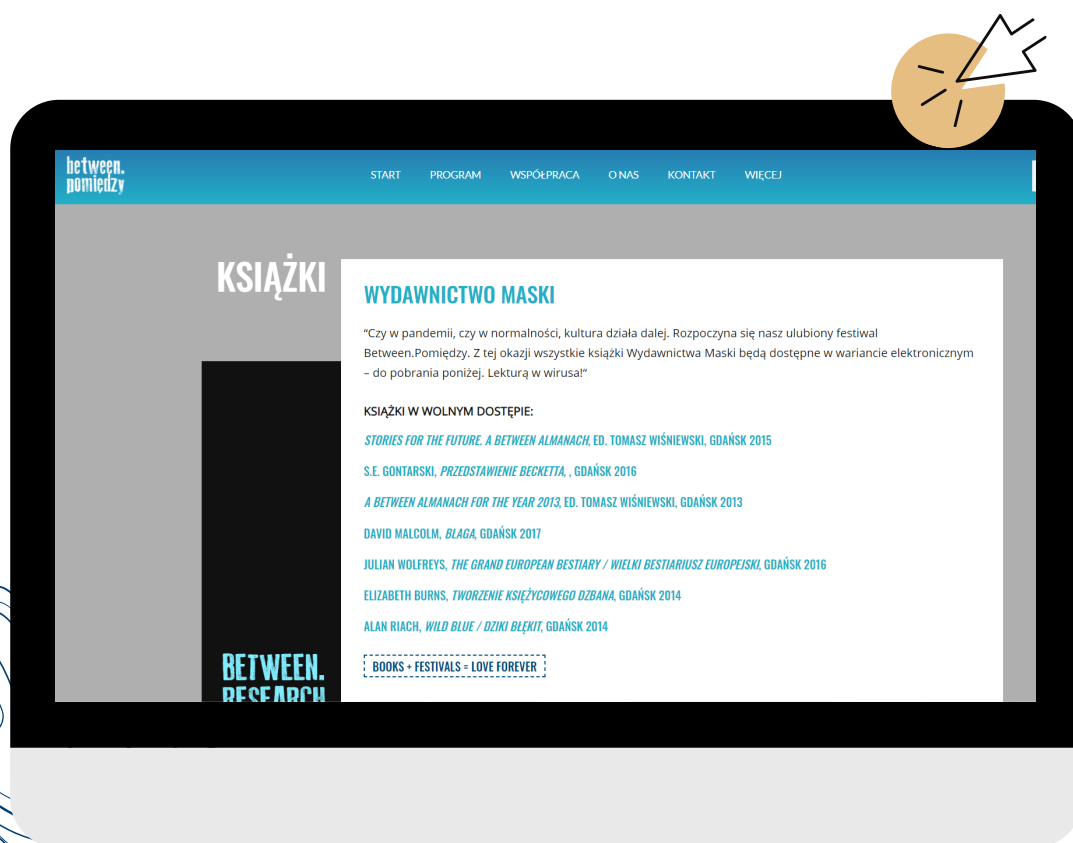
[Suzanne Walsh](#)  
and poems read  
at the time  
of lockdown 2020





# Between.Publishing

Our website offers Open Access to seven books that we have published with the Maski Press. They include two Almanachs (you will find many of the poems that have been discussed in this chapter) and translations of poetry by Julian Wolfreys, Elizabeth Burns, and Alan Riach.



# A project

Work in a group of four. Watch the recordings by Tatenda Matsvai and Suzanne Walsh that are in the section Vocal Poetry. Write down the lines which you find most intriguing – at least five per person. Read them aloud to one another and then choose five that you will discuss in detail. Concentrate on their internal meanings. Do you find it an easy task? At the end of this project write down – as a group – a paragraph for each line you’ve selected. Or choose your own creative response to the recordings. A short film? A sequence of photographs? A set of memes? If you work individually, you may write a review of 300 words on any of the reading sessions.



# Group work



In your group of 2-3, record your reading of the poem “Where” by Michael Edwards. Prepare the reading in a careful way. What is the pace of your reading? Is the tempo steady or not? Are you going to read it as a chorus, or perhaps line by line? Or word by word? Or can you work out another solution? Make sure you give appropriate attention to each individual line: even though there is obvious similarity between them, they are much different. How to give justice to this difference in your recording? Make sure you understand each and every word that appears in the poem. If unanswerable questions appear, write them down; perhaps they will inspire you in due course? Don’t forget that when reading poetry some questions may remain unanswered for ever. You may wish to send us your work; we’d be delighted to listen to it.

## “Where” by Michael Edwards

Where, is a well.

Where, is the night’s incisors.

Where, is an apple-tree in the quicksand of its shadow.

Where, is hills that are like hills.

Where, is the long sharpness of a blade.

Where is a bird sown.

Where, is wine changed to wine.

Where, is beyond the gate and the garden.

Where, is a man burning.

Where, is orchards and galaxies consumed, conceived again.

Fruit, stars, ponderable spirit.