

## Poetry smuggling in a liberal society

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*Abstract.* I make a proposal for how one can continue to teach poetry through official channels in a liberal society, conceived as a set of rules for citizens who disagree on a lot of things, including the value of poetry. The proposal is to quote inspiring or relevant poems in textbooks for other disciplines.

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*Dogs, cats, and fish*

*All of them wish*

*Not to be stuck in this system*

*However much you'll miss them*

In a liberal society, citizens disagree about a lot of things. Some citizens believe in the existence of God, others do not. Some people believe in more regulation of the pornography industry, some in less. Some also believe, of a body of highly-rated poetry, that much of this poetry deserves this rating, while others believe that there can be no objective ranking of poetry. On one well-known conception, a liberal society provides a system of rules for people with different views to live together and the rules are supposed to be neutral, in that they are not designed to promote some views over others (see Quong 2011: 8). However, some views are discouraged, because they are a threat to the very existence of a liberal society, for example that

all poets should be forced down mines. Leaving aside such extreme views, how does one justify teaching poetry as part of the official school curriculum in the liberal society we have conceived? One cannot introduce students to all poetry. And for any poem that one might introduce, an anti-objectivist about poetry can say, “Why are you teaching that, because I think there is no reason to favour that poem over any other? People differ on their favourite poems; stop using the school curriculum to promote your favourites.”

A solution here is the following combination. Abandon any official teaching of poetry. There is no poetry class in school apart from perhaps a voluntary one at lunch hour or after the school day ends. But one still introduces students to poems, in other disciplines. For example, one writes a biology textbook and there are inspiring quotations from poems at the beginnings of chapters. As it happens, this biology textbook is better than others and one cannot prevent the use of these quotations in such a text in a liberal society.

But to implement this solution, lovers of the canon of poetry have to be fanatically determined in other disciplines. One’s textbook has to beat the textbook of the man or woman who would not include any canonical poem. Also the proposal does not cover encouraging commentary on quoted poems. But I think it is still a solution to the problem, albeit a partial one. Though the proposal I have made seems an obvious move once said, I have yet to encounter it.

## **Reference**

Quong, J. 2011. *Liberalism without Perfection*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.