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Contemporary Poetry, the Marginal Elite in World Literature?

I examine how contemporary poetry occupies a marginal position in world literature, and what different understandings of marginality it offers us. I offer examples from contemporary French and multilingual poetry including: Michèle Métail, Caroline Bergvall, and Ryōko Sekiguchi.

World literature is dominated by the novel, whereas poetry seems to survive in the margins. Firstly, poetry's marginality can be understood as an elite aesthetics rather than the position of being powerless or silenced because poetry still holds significant cultural capital and is perceived as highbrow. But poetry's marginality is also about the resistance of the minor to the mainstream. Namely, poetry resists easy commodification and the global literary market's exchange logic. For some, poetry retains the truth – telling power of literature and is less obliged to cater to the middle – class international reader's taste, to which the global novel is seen to have capitulated (Apter; Snyder).

Nevertheless, we should acknowledge that contemporary poetry does have planetary significance. E.g. The growth of eco – poetry since 2000 attests to poetry's ability to respond to global issues such as climate change, migration, racial inequality. But this planetary and socially relevant poetry carries a caveat: that we increasingly only value poetry that concerns “global challenges”, the buzzword in funding calls and research statements. This raises the question of value, which is central to the logic of marginalisation.

The relation between contemporary poetry and contemporary art could rethink poetry's marginality within and beyond world literature. ‘People might not want to read poetry, but they do want to listen to it’ (Kubin). The rise of poetry performances since 1990s (Edmond) has relegated poetry increasingly to the gallery space, emphasising audience participation. Poetry's key question is not ‘what is poetry?’, but ‘when is poetry?’. This shifts the concept of marginality from the spatial to a temporal, contextual paradigm.