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The Authority of Poetry

I

On March 20, 2003, despite opposition from governments and people all over the world, the United States invaded Iraq. Something broke in me, and in many people, that day. I was overwhelmed with a sense of absolute uselessness. For a while I buried my head in the sand. Throughout the ensuing time, as the situation has worsened and the lies and horrible truths have gradually been exposed, I have struggled to regain a sense of the meaningfulness of political action. The first turning point came on March 20, 2004, when two hundred people demonstrated for peace right here in Oxford. C. J. Rhodes, one of my ex-students who is also a preacher and who at age twenty possessed much of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s charisma and eloquence, gave a ringing oration against the war. Beth Ann Fennelly's daughter Claire, then two years old, was dressed up in pink as a Princess of Peace. My husband Peter Wirth carried a sign that I had hand-lettered. In red and blue letters with red and blue swirls, it declared: *Another World Is Possible*.

Another world is possible, and the poem tells us about this world.

I do not mean, by this, that the poem has any particular content, takes any particular stance, or expresses any particular ideology. I do not mean that the poem is utopian, or carries us away from the world that is. The "other world" that's possible is precisely *this* world, but this world apprehended by the senses, held up to the attention, revived. As William Carlos Williams writes in Spring and All, making a pun on the word "move" that expresses the connection between the awakened heart and the transformed reality, "poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it." Robert Hass makes a related point in "Listening and Making," an essay from his book Twentieth Century Pleasures. He describes a "small antipersonnel bomb" that was perfected during the Vietnam War, "that contained sharp fragments of plastic which, having torn through the flesh and lodged in the body, could not be found by an X-ray." In what seems at first to be an odd analogy, Hass compares this bomb to the rhythms of poetry, in that both get inside the body and *change* things,¹ even though by ordinary means they remain undetected. Differentiating between the two, then, Hass concludes, "And it seems to me . . . that there really are technes"—which means crafts or arts—"on the side of life and technes on the side of death." The phrase has stayed with me: the poem as a techne, the material of which is language, on the side of life. In lifting the things—and people—of the world to our attention, in engaging us with the complex, sensory richness of images, thoughts, and feelings, the poem confers on us life more abundant. I am not alone in believing that the intensified awareness of life and of others that poetry can offer has crucial potential to effect political transformation. As Franz Kafka once remarked, "War, in its first phase, emerges out of a total lack of the sense of imagination."²

There is a crucial distinction, of course, between death and the technes of death. Many of the greatest poems are about death—are, as Keats writes in the "Ode to a Nightingale," "half in love" with death. For death is not the pure negative, the antithesis of poetry. As a condition beyond limitations and contingencies, paradoxically beyond mortality, it is desired as much as feared: a ground and a consummation. Tormented by the beauty of the nightingale's song, Keats addresses the bird in famous lines about this longing:

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad

In such an ecstasy!

But for a poem to be any good, it cannot be part of the technology of death. And that is an entirely different thing. It cannot lie—as our government has lied to us. It cannot fudge or weasel, cannot bluster or ride roughshod over what is, using the language of evasions and abstractions. It finds its strength in specificity, in the world of the body and the body of the world; it makes vital what William Blake calls “Minute Particulars,” or what the haiku poets call “the world of ten thousand things.” It may serve some strange gods, but it does not serve Mammon. Its values are not the values of those who bomb cities, exploit peoples, steal elections, clearcut forests. It does not drive a tank, an SUV. The poem walks barefoot, and carries its shoes in its hands.

II

The authority of the poem cannot be separated from the complex process, the intricate series of choices and negotiations, which are different for each poem, and by which it comes into being. In his beautiful villanelle “The Waking,” Theodore Roethke speaks of the creative process as a mysterious coming-into-being that offers the poet both guidance and wisdom: “I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow / . . . I learn by going where I have to go.” In his essay “The Figure a Poem Makes,” Robert Frost writes that a poem “must be a revelation, or a series of revelations, as much for the poet as for the reader.” He remarks that a poem “finds its own name as it goes,” and issues not in some final and static truth, but in a “momentary stay against confusion.” And in “Of Modern Poetry,” Wallace Stevens writes that, though in the past “the scene was set” and the poem “repeated what / Was in the script,” the modern poem must be, instead, “The poem of the act of the mind,” or “The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice.” Regardless of differences between these poets and their poetry, all these statements speak of the poem as an organic process and affirm its ability to create a path that can be trusted, with truths that can be trusted, however contingent, both at the end and along the way. What Antonio Machado writes of life applies to modern poetry too: “*Caminante, no hay camino / Se hace camino al andar.*” Or, translated, “Traveler, there is no road. The road is made in the going.”

The meaning of a poem cannot be separated from the process and whole body of the poem, just as the meaning of a person cannot be separated from the life and body of that person, or—as the radical branch of environmental thought known as deep ecology teaches us—the meaning of the universe cannot be separated from the whole living universe. In this lies the poem’s authority. My own experience has been that I find out what is true for me by finding out whether my thoughts, perceptions, and feelings can issue in good poetry. If what I have to say can be made into a poem to which I can finally assent aesthetically, I can trust it and the feelings that inspire it. If, in contrast, the poem remains half-formed, half-baked, never comes fully into itself in terms of the rigors and beauties of language and the complexities of experience—then, very likely, I cannot trust it because there is something wrong with the feelings or ideas behind the poem.³ I believe in the moral authority of the poem, but it’s quite different from, and infinitely more complex than, something that can be detached and codified. The moral authority of the poem lies in this wholeness, this state of realization, whereby it fulfills itself according to the path it lays down for itself, rather than in its espousal of any particular idea, code, or belief.

III

There is no necessary relationship, of course, between the authority of a poem and its autobiographical quality. Despite what students in beginning poetry workshops think, *as a poem* (rather than, say, a historical document) the poem does not become truer for having “really” happened. However, a high degree of autobiographicality does characterize much contemporary American poetry, including my own, and so I want to offer some thoughts on this subject, too.

In many of my poems, I write about intimate personal matters. When I give readings or speak with students I am often asked how I can feel comfortable revealing myself to strangers. Why do I choose to strip away the layers of the social self in poems about

motherhood, birth, sexuality, divorce, grief, aging, desire, death? Sometimes people have asked me if my poems are “confessional”—like the poems of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, or Robert Lowell, for instance, that derive from and explore personal traumas and extreme psychological states. And it’s true, I write very close to the bone. With some chagrin I have become aware that, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Confessions*, I have a formidable desire to tell the truth about myself in order to find out whether, at the end of it, I will still have a place in community.⁴ In one sense this is a spiritual longing; it has to do with laying myself open to the puritan God of my childhood—a God I do not consciously believe in—in the hopes that He will accept me into His love. It is also a social longing; like many others, I’ve struggled not to go silent, not to live a subterranean life, but to speak and write against the roles and expectations that have confined me.

So yes, to some extent I write out of a desire to be invited to the table.

But in a deeper sense, my poems are not confessional. For “*Je est un autre*,” “I is an other,” as Rimbaud has said. I cannot write for you my own experience, no matter how close I hew to the bone. Language floats free, follows its own currents and channels—and I float free, free even of this experiencing self, which is mine, my job to behold and experience and try to understand. This is one awareness I’ve gained from thirty years of practicing yoga. When one begins to study yoga or meditation, one is taught to detach oneself from oneself, and then behold oneself; for instance, when I practice *Savasana*, or Corpse position, I release my body into the ground, as if dead, but at the same time I float above myself, seeing myself. In this state of mind, everything and nothing is autobiography; everything and nothing speaks the self. And my practice of yoga only reinforces an awareness I’ve always had. For my whole life I have felt not only that my experience *happened* to me, but that it was *given* to me—and that I was summoned, enjoined, to be and say this self, in all its specificity. Gerard Manley Hopkins, the great 19th-century Jesuit poet, has a beautiful way of expressing this. In his sonnet “As kingfishers catch fire,” he writes:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came*.

I have felt it is my job to be, and express, this one-time-only infinite speck of dust which is my named identity.

Why? To testify.⁵

IV

One of my favorite contemporary poets is Lucille Clifton. In many books over many decades she has affirmed the importance of the personal, and the poet’s right to write about anything whatsoever—lynchings, abortion, menopause, breast cancer, racism, widowhood, lust when you’re old. Like many other contemporary American poets, perhaps especially women and minority poets, she fights against clichés, lies, repression, oppression, via a poetry grounded in the body and largely in her own experience. I’ve heard students ask her the same question I’ve been asked about daring to write from such personal, intimate experience. And I’ve stolen her answer: “As a poet my business is with everything human.”

But it is difficult to speak of the functions that personal experience serves in modern poetry, because there are so many kinds of poems and also so many different depths from which poetry can arise. Any given statement may suit some poems but will not suit others. To conceptualize this matter of depth, I sometimes imagine a ladder with hundreds of rungs, descending into the sea. On this ladder, some poems cling to the upper rungs; though they may be entertaining, in terms of depth they remain shallow. In these poems, personal experience tends to remain anecdotal, not to go beyond itself and its occasion. A little deeper, many poems swim around the middle rungs. In these, personal experience reaches beyond itself. We read them, we find ourselves in them, but still in terms of the poet’s and our own consciously held identities. For instance, we read Clifton’s delightful and raunchy

poem “to my last period,” and if we are women we know what she means, and if we are men we know more about women. “well girl, goodbye,” she writes, addressing her period:

after thirty-eight years.
thirty-eight years and you
never arrived
splendid in your red dress
without trouble for me
somewhere, somehow.
now it is done,
and I feel just like
the grandmothers who,
after the hussy has gone,
sit holding her photograph
and sighing, *wasn't she
beautiful? wasn't she beautiful?*

Or we read William Carlos Williams's great short poem “This Is Just to Say,” and take the pulse of domesticity, brought to life in one particular marriage:

This Is Just to Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

But the poems from the deepest levels, down near the groundswell of the sea, exercise a different authority. No matter how autobiographical they may be, they seem spoken out of Being itself: both completely personal and completely impersonal at the same time. Every reader of poetry will have his or her own examples of such poems. One, for me, is Rainer Maria Rilke's beautiful Sonnet to Orpheus, II, 13. Here are the first two stanzas:

Be ahead of all parting, as if it were
behind you, like the winter you just weathered.
Because among the winters there is one so endless winter,
that, overwintering it, your heart recovers altogether.

Be always dead in Eurydice—rise up singing,
rise up praising, once again concerned with purer matters.
Be here, among the dwindling, in the realm of leaning,
be a ringing glass, that in sounding swiftly shatters.[6](#)

As the French actor/director Laurent Terzieff says: “*Le vrai poète, c'est celui qui fait entendre le silence des mots, qui va chercher au coeur de son coeur cet être qui est plus lui-même que lui-même, et qui est pourtant inconnu.*” “The true poet is he (or she) who makes heard the silence of words, who goes in search at the heart of his heart for this being which is more himself than himself, and which is nevertheless unknown.” I am aware that this way of talking about the authority of the poem may sound woolly, dated, hopelessly Romantic to a postmodern academic audience. But poets and philosophers make very big

claims for the poem—and that is an entirely different matter from making very big claims for oneself; it has nothing to do with ego. Theodore Roethke would fall on his knees in thanks when he finished writing a poem. As an old man, William Blake would sing songs to his wife, of which he told her, “Though I call them mine, I know they are not mine.”

V

Some final thoughts on authority and poetry:

First: Poetry exists because the living don’t stay living and the dead don’t stay dead.

If we could police these borders, no one would ever have to utter the words that damn Goethe’s Faust, who has sold his soul to the Devil and gained immortality as long as he does not ever ache for anything, but who then sees a vision of Helen of Troy and cannot bear its passing away: “Linger a moment, thou art so fair.” If we could police these borders, no one would ever have to try to cheat his death, as Keats does in an unfinished fragment found on a manuscript after his death. This fragment, “This Living Hand,” bloods words with grief and passion as if by some desperate magic they could become flesh:

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again
And thou be conscience-calmed—see here it is—
I hold it towards you.

And if the sea, time’s cradle, did not continually chant “death, death, death, death, death,” no poet would ever come into existence, born out of the merely human; for no one would walk the beach at night, pierced by the carols of loss, tormented by “the fire, the sweet hell within, / The unknown want, the destiny of me,” that, as Whitman writes in “Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking,” marks the birth of the daimon.

And second: The poem gives access to the holy in an age of spiritual emptiness, an age of destitution.

I am not a Heideggerian, but I have been reading Heidegger’s essay “What Are Poets For?” and though it was written over fifty years ago, I have been struck by its pertinence to the early twenty-first century. The time is destitute, Heidegger says, not only because what he calls “the gods” have fled, but because “the destitute time is no longer able even to experience its own destitution.” At the beginning of this essay I referred to the nearly overwhelming sense of brokenness against which not only I have fought during the last several years—a sense that has many causes, among them 9/11 and the consequent climate of fear and repression, this country’s environmental policies, the runaway tyranny of global capitalism, and the invasion of Iraq. Surely the techne of death are mighty. And surely many people—among them many Americans—are destitute to the point of no longer experiencing their own destitution. And perhaps, as Heidegger writes,

the world’s night is now approaching its midnight. Perhaps the world’s time is now becoming the completely destitute time. But also perhaps not, not yet, not even yet, despite the immeasurable need, despite all suffering, despite nameless sorrow, despite the growing and spreading peacelessness, despite the mounting confusion. Long is the time because even terror, taken by itself as a ground for turning, is powerless as long as there is no turn with mortal men.⁷ But there is a turn with mortals when these find the way to their own nature.

What is that nature? Mortals, Heidegger says, reach into the abyss. They “remain closer to that absence” because they can still be “touched by presence, the ancient name of Being.” That, in a destitute time, is what the poem is for. It reawakens hunger—for the poet,

“singing,” attends “to the trace of the fugitive gods.” In making us know what we celebrate and long for, it revives in us our capacity for meaning.

Footnotes

¹ Since this is not a scholarly essay *per se*, I have chosen to dispense with the scholarly apparatus of full citations; nearly all my quotations are quite easy to find and to follow.

References to the physical effects of poetry, its ability to get inside the body and change things, are legion. For example, in a famous letter, Emily Dickinson wrote to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “If I read a book, and it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me, I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only ways I know it.” In his *Autobiography*, William Carlos Williams quotes from Charles Olson’s essay “Projective Verse” to discuss what they both believed to be the necessary grounding of free verse in “the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE,” and “the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE.” But if the body (head and heart) shapes the poem, the poem, conversely, must act upon or within the body.

But every child knows that poetry gets inside the body and changes things—which is why children’s eyes grow big, their hearts beat faster, and they sway back and forth as they listen to nursery rhymes. Most lose this awareness of this kinetic, participatory intimacy with poetry as they grow older and, in particular, move through school systems where poetry is taught as a matter of memorizable terms and paraphrasable content.

² Trans. Gustav Janouch, *Gespräche mit Kafka: Aufzeichnungen und Erinnerungen. Erweiterte Ausgabe*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1968.

³ For instance, my dissertation director, William Spengemann, used to discuss some of Whitman’s more strident affirmations in “Song of Myself.” A line like “It is not chaos or death—it is form, union, plan—it is eternal life—it is Happiness,” near the end of the poem, is only effective if the reader already agrees that everything that cannot be expressed, cannot be known, will eventually add up to perfection. The experience of the poem is headed in one direction; Whitman wants to yank it around and make it go in another.

⁴ My colleague Jay Watson points out that “community” has a share in this decision, too.

⁵ “Testify” has a spiritual resonance, and I use it deliberately here, though I do not want to evoke any particular creed or denomination.

⁶

Sei allem Abschied voran, als wäre es hinter
dir, wie der Winter, der eben geht.
Denn unter Wintern ist einer so endlos Winter,
dass, überwinternd, dein Herz überhaupt übersteht.

Sei immer tot in Eurydike-, singender steige,
preisender steige zurück in den reinen Bezug.
Hier, unter Schwindenden, sei, im Reiche der Neige,
sei ein klingendes Glas, das sich im Klang schon zerschlug.

Sei—und wisse zugleich des Night-Seins Bedingung,
den unendlichen Grund deiner innigen Schwingung,
dass du sie völlig vollziehst dieses einzige Mal.

Zu dem gebrauchten sowohl, wie zum dumpfen und stummen
Vorat der vollen Natur, den unsäglichen Summen,
zähle dich jubelnd hinzu und vernichte die Zahl.

Translated by Howard A. Landman

Z “Terror” has a particular resonance for us since September 11. I chose to quote this sentence because, no matter what Heidegger may specifically have meant by it, it is pertinent: violence and counterviolence only dig a deeper and deeper pit, as we see with the world’s rapidly deteriorating political situation. They will never provide a ground for meaningful transformation.