

The Hatred of Poetry

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In ninth grade English, Mrs. X required us to memorize and recite a poem, so I went and asked the Topeka High librarian to direct me to the shortest poem she knew, and she suggested Marianne Moore's "Poetry," which, in the 1967 version, reads in its entirety:

I, too, dislike it.

Reading it, however, with a perfect
contempt for it, one discovers in
it, after all, a place for the genuine.

I remember thinking my classmates were suckers for having mainly memorized Shakespeare's eighteenth sonnet, whereas I had only to recite twenty-four words. Never mind the fact that a set rhyme

scheme and iambic pentameter make fourteen of Shakespeare's lines easier to memorize than Moore's three, each one of which is interrupted by a conjunctive adverb—a parallelism of awkwardness that basically serves as its form. That, plus the four instances of "it," makes Moore sound like a priest begrudgingly admitting that sex has its function while trying to avoid using the word, an effect amplified by the deliberately clumsy enjambment of the second line and the third ("in / it"). In fact, "Poetry" is a very difficult poem to commit to memory, as I demonstrated by failing to get it right each of the three chances I was given by Mrs. X, who was looking down at the text, my classmates cracking up.

I, too My contempt for the assignment was, after all, imperfect. Even now I routinely misquote the second sentence; I just Googled the poem and had to correct what I typed out above, but who could forget the first? *I, too, dislike it* has been on repeat in my head since 1993; when I open a laptop to write or a book to read: *I, too, dislike it* echoes in my inner ear. When a poet is being introduced (including myself) at a reading, whatever else

I hear, I hear: *I, too, dislike it*. When I teach, I basically hum it. When somebody tells me, as so many people have told me, that they don't get poetry in general or my poetry in particular and/or believe that poetry is dead: *I, too, dislike it*. Sometimes this refrain has the feel of negative rumination and sometimes a kind of manic, mantric affirmation, as close as I get to unceasing prayer.

"Poetry": What kind of art assumes the dislike of its audience and what kind of artist aligns herself with that dislike, even encourages it? An art hated from without and within. What kind of art has as a condition of its possibility a perfect contempt? And then, even reading contemptuously, you don't achieve the genuine. You can only clear a *place* for it—you still don't encounter the actual poem, the genuine article. Every few years an essay appears in a mainstream periodical denouncing poetry or proclaiming its death, usually blaming existing poets for the relative marginalization of the art, and then the defenses light up the blogosphere before the culture, if we can call it a culture, turns its attention, if we can call it attention, back to the future. But why don't

we ask: What kind of art is defined—has been defined for millennia—by such a rhythm of denunciation and defense? Many more people agree they hate poetry than can agree what poetry is. I, too, dislike it, and have largely organized my life around it (albeit with far less discipline and skill than Marianne Moore) and do not experience that as a contradiction because poetry and the hatred of poetry are for me—and maybe for you—inextricable.

Caedmon, the first poet in English whose name we know, learned the art of song in a dream. According to Bede's *Historia*, Caedmon was an illiterate cowherd who couldn't sing. When, during this or that merry feast, it was decided that everyone in turn would contribute a song, Caedmon would withdraw in embarrassment, maybe claiming he had to go look after the animals. One night, somebody tries to pass Caedmon the harp after dinner, and he flees to the stable. There among the ungulates he drifts off and is visited by a mysterious figure, probably God. "You must sing to me," says God. "I can't," Caedmon says, if not in these words. "That's why I'm

*What should
I sing?*

sleeping in the stable instead of drinking mead with my friends around the fire." But God (or an angel or demon—the text is vague) keeps demanding a song. "But what should I sing?" asks Caedmon, who I imagine is desperate, cold-sweating through a nightmare. "Sing the beginning of created things," instructs the visitor. Caedmon opens his mouth and, to his amazement, gorgeous verses praising God pour forth.

Caedmon awakes as a poet, and eventually becomes a monk. But the poem he sings upon waking is not, according to Bede, as good as the poem he sang in his dream, "for songs, be they never so well made, cannot be turned of one tongue into another, word for word, without loss to their grace and worthiness." If that's true of translation in the waking world, it's doubly true of translation from a dream. The actual poem Caedmon brings back to the human community is necessarily a mere echo of the first.

*The loss of
grace*

Allen Grossman, whose reading of Caedmon I'm pirating here, abstracts from this story (and there are many versions of this story) a harsh lesson: Poetry arises from the desire to get beyond

the finite and the historical—the human world of violence and difference—and to reach the transcendent or divine. You're moved to write a poem, you feel called upon to sing, because of that transcendent impulse. But as soon as you move from that impulse to the actual poem, the song of the infinite is compromised by the finitude of its terms. In a dream your verses can defeat time, your words can shake off the history of their usage, you can represent what can't be represented (e.g., the creation of representation itself), but when you wake, when you rejoin your friends around the fire, you're back in the human world with its inflexible laws and logic.

*The virtual
and the actual*

Thus the poet is a tragic figure. The poem is always a record of failure. There is an “undecidable conflict” between the poet's desire to sing an alternative world and, as Grossman puts it, the “resistance to alternative making inherent in the materials of which any world must be composed.” In an essay on Hart Crane, Grossman develops his notion of a “virtual poem”—what we might call poetry with a capital “P,” the abstract potential of the medium as felt by the poet when called upon to sing—and opposes it to the “actual

poem,” which necessarily betrays that impulse when it joins the world of representation.

Here I am bypassing the beautiful intricacies of Grossman's account to extract from his under-read and almost freakishly brilliant essays the idea that actual poems are structurally foredoomed by a “bitter logic” that cannot be overcome by any level of virtuosity: Poetry isn't hard, it's impossible. (Maybe this helps us understand Moore: Our contempt for any particular poem must be perfect, be total, because only a ruthless reading that allows us to measure the gap between the actual and the virtual will enable us to experience, if not a genuine poem—no such thing—a place for the genuine, whatever that might mean.) Grossman speaks to me because, like so many poets, I live in the space between what I am moved to do and what I can do, and confront in that disconnect not only my individual limitations (although I feel those, too) but also the structure of the art as I conceive it. And I reencounter that implicit structure, again and again, in the claims of both those who purport to denounce poetry and those who would rush to its defense.

A bitter logic

You're a poet

The bitterness of poetic logic is particularly astringent because we were taught at an early age that we are all poets simply by virtue of being human. Our ability to write poems is therefore in some sense the measure of our humanity. At least that's what we were taught in Topeka: We all have feelings inside us (where are they located, exactly?); poetry is the purest expression (the way an orange expresses juice?) of this inner domain. Since language is the stuff of the social and poetry the expression in language of our irreducible individuality, our personhood is tied up with our poethood. "You're a poet and you don't even know it," Mr. X used to tell us in second grade; he would utter this irritating little refrain whenever we said something that happened to rhyme. I think the jokey cliché betrays a real belief about the universality of poetry: Some kids take piano lessons, some kids study tap dance, but we don't say every kid is a pianist or dancer. You're a poet, however, whether or not you know it, because to be part of a linguistic community—to be hailed as a "you" at all—is to be endowed with poetic capacity.

If you are an adult foolish enough to tell another adult that you are (still!) a poet, they will often describe for you their falling away from poetry: I wrote it in high school; I dabbled in college. Almost never do they write it now. They will tell you they have a niece or nephew who writes poetry. These familiar encounters—my most recent was at the dentist, my mouth propped open while Dr. X almost gagged me with a mirror, as if searching for my innermost feelings—have a tone that's difficult to describe. There is embarrassment for the poet—couldn't you get a real job and put your childish ways behind you?—but there is also embarrassment on the part of the non-poet, because having to acknowledge one's total alienation from poetry chafes against the early association of poem and self. The ghost of that romantic conjunction makes the falling away from poetry a falling away from the pure potentiality of being human into the vicissitudes of being an actual person in a concrete historical situation, your hands in my mouth. I had the sensation that Dr. X, as he knocked the little mirror against my molars, was contemptuous of

A mirror in the mouth

the idea that genuine poetry could issue from such an opening. And Dr. X was right: There is no genuine poetry; there is only, after all, and at best, a place for it.

The awkward and even tense exchange between a poet and non-poet—they often happen on an airplane or in a doctor's office or some other contemporary no-place—is a little interpersonal breach that reveals how inextricable “poetry” is from our imagination of social life. Whatever we think of particular poems, “poetry” is a word for the meeting place of the private and the public, the internal and the external: My capacity to express myself poetically and to comprehend such expressions is a fundamental qualification for social recognition. If I have no interest in poetry or if I feel repelled by actual poems, either I am failing the social or the social is failing me. I don't mean that Dr. X or anyone else thinks in these terms, or that these assumptions about poetry are present for everyone, let alone in the same degree, or that this is the only or best way of thinking about poetry, but I am convinced that the embarrassment, or suspicion, or anger that

is often palpable in such meetings derives from this sense of poetry's tremendous social stakes (combined with a sense of its tremendous social marginalization). And it's these stakes which make actual poems an offense: If my seatmate in a holding pattern over Denver calls on me to sing, demands a poem from me that will unite coach and first class in one community, I can't do it. Maybe this is because I don't know how to sing or because the passengers don't know how to listen, but it might also be because “poetry” denotes an impossible demand. This is one underlying reason why poetry is so often met with contempt rather than mere indifference and why it is periodically denounced as opposed to simply dismissed: Most of us carry at least a weak sense of a correlation between poetry and human possibility that cannot be realized by poems. The poet, by his very claim to be a maker of poems, is therefore both an embarrassment and accusation.

*A holding
pattern*

And when you are foolish enough to identify yourself as a poet, your interlocutors will often ask: A *published* poet? And when you tell them that you are, indeed, a published poet, they seem

at least vaguely impressed. Why is that? It's not like they or anybody they know reads poetry journals. And yet there is something deeply right, I think, about this knee-jerk appeal to publicity. It's as if to say: Everybody can write a poem, but has your poetry, the distillation of your innermost being, been found authentic and intelligible by others? Can it circulate among persons, make of its readership, however small, a People in that sense? This accounts for the otherwise bafflingly persistent association of poetry and fame—baffling since no poets are famous among the general population. To demand proof of fame is to demand proof that your songs made it back intact from the dream in the stable to the social world of the fire, that your song is at once utterly specific to you and exemplary for others.

Stable to fire

(At the turn of the millennium, when I was the editor of a tiny poetry and art magazine, I would receive a steady stream of submissions—our address was online—from people who had clearly never read our publication but whose cover letters expressed a remarkable desperation to have their poems printed *anywhere*. Some of these letters—tens of them—explained that the

poet in question was suffering from a terminal condition and wanted, needed, to see his or her poems published before he or she died. I have three letters here that contain the sentence, "I don't know how long I have." I also received multiple letters from prisoners who felt poetry publication was their best available method for asserting they were human beings, not merely criminals. I'm not mocking these poets; I'm offering them as examples of the strength of the implicit connection between poetry and the social recognition of the poet's humanity. It's an association so strong that the writers in question observe no contradiction in the fact that they are attempting to secure and preserve their personhood in a magazine that no one they know will see. It is as though the actual poem and publication do not matter; what matters is that the poet will know and can report to others that she is a published poet, a distinction that nobody—not Death, not the social death of exclusion from the Law—can take from her. Poetry makes you famous without an audience, an abstract or kind of proto-fame: It is less that I am known in the broader community than that I know I could be

*I don't know
how long I
have*

End here

known, less that you know my name than that I know I am named: *I am a poet / and you know it.*)

And when you are foolish enough to identify yourself as a poet, your interlocutor will often ask you to name your favorite poets. When you say, "Cyrus Console," he squints as if searching his memory and nods as if he can almost recall the work and the name, even though of course he can't (none of the hundreds of non-poet acquaintances who have asked you this sort of question ever can). But I have decided—am deciding as I write—that I accept that look, that I value it. I love that the non-poet is conditioned to believe that the name and work are almost within reach even though the only poems he's encountered in the last few decades have been at weddings and funerals. I love how it seems like he's on the verge of recalling a specific line before he slowly shakes his head and concedes: I've never heard of him or her; it doesn't ring a bell. Among other things this is a (no more than semiconscious) performance of the demands of poetry, at this point almost a muscle memory: The poem is a technology for mediating between me and my people; the poem must include me, must recognize me as

*Who are your
favorite poets?*

be recognizable—so recognizable I should be able to recall it without ever having seen it, like the face of God.

Exchanges of this sort strike me as significant because I feel they are contemporary descendants, however diminished, of those founding dialogues about poetry that have set, however shakily, the terms for most denunciations and defenses in the West. Plato, in the most influential attack on poetry in recorded history, concluded that there was no place for poetry in the Republic because poets are rhetoricians who pass off imaginative projections as the truth and risk corrupting the citizens of the just city, especially the impressionable youth. (Socrates' questions in *The Republic* are so leading and full of traps that he might as well have his hands in his interlocutors' mouths.) One difference between Plato's Socrates and Dr. X is that Socrates fears and resents the corrupting power of actual poetic performance—he thinks poets are going to excite excessive emotions, for instance—whereas Dr. X presumably fears and resents his inability to be moved by or comprehend what passes for a poem. Still, Socrates' interrogations of poets—what do they really know,

*None shall
sing worthily*

verse, or is it two lines of verse presented as citation? The slash exists in Pound; Olson is copying it from the *Pisan Cantos* (“That maggots shd / eat the dead Bullock”), and Pound is copying it, according to Guy Davenport, from John Adams’s letters, where such abbreviations were common. So the virgule itself is being quoted, another level of virtuality. My point is that here, at what for many constitutes the beginning of postwar American poetry, we don’t exactly have a poem at all: We have something that can be read and cannot not be read on some level—especially coming from a poet who was a critic first—as a citation or example of verse. Despite Olson’s emphasis in his essays on the technical achievements of “open field poetry,” I think his famous first line is a way of announcing that his poem is a virtual space, not yet or not just an actual poem (“I tended to find lines of poetry beautiful only when I encountered them quoted in prose . . . so that what was communicated was less a particular poem . . .”)

“Virgule”: from Latin *virgula*—a little rod, from *virga*: branch, rod. We hear in it the *Virgula Divina*—the divining rod that locates water or

other precious substances underground, a rod that mediates or pretends to mediate between the terrestrial and the divine. We hear (although the etymology is disputed) the name of the ancient poet known to us as Virgil, Dante’s guide through hell. And we hear the meteorological phenomenon known as “virga,” my favorite kind of weather: streaks of water or ice particles trailing from a cloud that evaporate before they reach the ground. It’s a rainfall that never quite closes the gap between heaven and earth, between the dream and fire; it’s a mark for verse that is not yet, or no longer, or not merely actual; they are phenomena whose failure to become or remain fully real allows them to figure something beyond the phenomenal.

Like rain that never reaches ground

Start again here

Great poets confront the limits of actual poems, tactically defeat or at least suspend that actuality, sometimes quit writing altogether, becoming celebrated for their silence; truly horrible poets unwittingly provide a glimmer of virtual possibility via the extremity of their failure; avant-garde poets hate poems for remaining poems instead of becoming bombs; and nostalgists hate poems for failing to do what they wrongly,

vaguely claim poetry once did. There are varieties of interpenetrating demands subsumed under the word “poetry”—to defeat time, to still it beautifully; to express irreducible individuality in a way that can be recognized socially or, à la Whitman, to achieve universality by being irreducibly social, less a person than a national technology; to defeat the language and value of existing society; to propound a measure of value beyond money. But one thing all these demands share is that they can’t ever be fulfilled with poems. Hating on actual poems, then, is often an ironic if sometimes unwitting way of expressing the persistence of the utopian ideal of Poetry, and the jeremiads in that regard are defenses, too.

The persistent demand

I hope it goes without saying that my summary here doesn’t pretend to be comprehensive—poems can fulfill any number of ambitions other than the ones I’m describing. They can *actually* be funny, or lovely, or offer solace, or courage, or inspiration to certain audiences at certain times; they can play a role in constituting a community; and so on. The admitted weakness in the story I’m telling about Poetry is that it doesn’t have

much to say about good poems in all their variety; it’s much better at dealing with great or horrible instances of the art. (And I don’t pretend to know where the art begins or ends: Another essay might look at how hip-hop, or spoken word, or other creative linguistic practices take up or bypass the contradictions I’ve been describing.) But the story is illuminating because it helps account for the persistent if mutable feeling that our moment’s poems are always already failing us—whether our moment is 380 B.C. or 731, or 1579, or 1819, or 2016. If the poems are impenetrable, they are elitist, only allowing some brainy elect into the community of persons because, as we all sense, a person is someone who can find consciousness shareable through poetry; if they are clichéd, they embarrass us badly, showing internality to be only communicable through language that’s been deadened, depersonalized by its popularity; and if they are weapons in a revolutionary struggle, they seem only to shoot blanks. Poets are liars not because, as Socrates says, they can fool us with the power of their imitations, but because identifying yourself as a poet implies you might overcome the bitter logic of the poetic

principle, and you can't. You can only compose poems that, when read with perfect contempt, clear a place for the genuine Poem that never appears.

End here



Today, June 27, 2014, Allen Grossman died.

From "The
Lecture"

After a long time, the voice of the man
Stops. It was good to talk on and on.
He rises. And the sea or forest becomes
A level way reaching to night and the
thunder.

But, in fact, there is no night. There is
No thunder.



I remember speaking a word whose meaning I didn't know but about which I had some inkling, some intuition, then inserting that word into a sentence, testing how it seemed to fit or chafe against the context and the syntax, rolling the

word around, as it were, on my tongue. I remember my feeling that I possessed only part of the meaning of the word, like one of those fragmented Friendship necklaces, and I had to find the other half in the social world of speech. I remember walking around as a child repeating a word I'd overheard, applying it wildly, and watching how, miraculously, I was rarely exactly wrong. If you are five and you point to a sycamore or an idle backhoe or a neighbor stooped over his garden or to images of these things on a television set and utter "vanish" or utter "varnish" you will never be only incorrect; if your parent or guardian is curious, she can find a meaning that makes you almost eerily prescient—the neighbor is dying, losing weight, or the backhoe has helped a structure disappear or is glazed with rainwater or the sheen of spectacle lends to whatever appears onscreen a strange finish. To derive your understanding of a word by watching others adjust to your use of it: Do you remember the feeling that sense was provisional and that two people could build around an utterance a world in which any usage signified? I think that's poetry. And when I felt I finally mastered a word, when I could

*Vanish or
varnish*