

## THE MEANING OF AMERICAN POETRY AT THE PRESENT TIME



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I will begin by talking to you first not about art, but about culture. Walt Whitman saw that the United States in its size and diversity, its relative freedom from aristocratic institutions and folk traditions, would need holding together. He thought it would be held together by poetry, by the American bard. He took that to be the meaning of American poetry: the machine created from words that would provide a form to hold us together, as other nations are held together by forms that hark back to old court cultures or to ancestral folk roots.

That has not been the case. You could make a stronger argument that such binding together of what threatens to come apart is accomplished by television, by twentieth-century popular music, and by professional sports, forms of the American genius which Whitman could not have predicted, and which he might have adored.

What then is poetry's actual place here, and what does that place tell us about our country? For instance, is poetry in America today altogether an elite art: for, by and of the few? Or does it reflect some of the democratic ideals and vision—still powerfully appealing, however vague or unfulfilled—of Walt Whitman?

To put the question differently, do the various ways the art of poetry pops up in American life today suggest any historical meaning or coherence? I mean to include all the diverse social facts we see that might mean "poetry" to anyone: the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* and the *Norton Anthology of Postmodern Poetry*; Poets in the Schools and also in hospitals, residences for the elderly, prisons and so forth. (Having occasionally visited prisons, as many or most of my poet friends have also done, I have wondered if the prison system is at least one area of American life where poetry sometimes has central, unquestionable importance, both for individuals and as a good that helps binds various individuals together.) I include, also, the poems published in *The New Yorker* and *The New Republic* each week; rap music; poetry "slams" and contests in bars; poetry readings; summer conferences; middle-aged nostalgia for the heyday of Bob Dylan; the importance of ethnic, gender, sexual-preference models

and audiences; the decline among academics of the old Modernist idea of Art as replacing religion; current highbrow movements like “language poetry” or “new formalism”; successful publishing phenomena ranging up and down the scale from Rod McKuen and Khalil Gibran, through Charles Bukowski, to Allen Ginsberg; the resurgence of regionalism; the ascendancy of “theory” in scholarship and a dearth of serious, practical criticism of new work; and, along with the rise of Creative Writing as an academic discipline, magazine articles deploring that rise, associating it with a decline in the art itself.

As a practical matter, I am interested in the flourishing but much-criticized institution of university creative writing programs—an institution that has taken on heightened interest for me ever since I began, a few years ago, to teach in such a program. (Like many writers of my generation who now teach in creative writing programs, I never attended one as a student.) All these phenomena are a matter primarily not of art, but of culture. That is, poetry like any art has a complex social setting. And arts change, and their social setting changes, in related processes that affect the cultural meaning of any new work and the world that surrounds it, in the mind of the writer and in the mind of the reader.

I will try to look at some specific examples of the transactions between past and present, between social setting and creation, in poetry—beginning with my own experience.

When I was a child, in the 1940s, many of the high-school-educated adults in lower-middle-class families like mine could recite some lines of poetry, often something sonorous and richly elegant purely as language: the opening stanza of Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”, perhaps; or some of Portia’s “The quality of mercy is not strained” speech from *The Merchant of Venice*; or one of the better-known Shakespeare sonnets; or Wordsworth’s “The world is too much with us” sonnet; or perhaps even part of Keats’s “To Autumn”, or of Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” ode, which in a survey of English teachers conducted by the *American Mercury* magazine in the 1920s was voted the greatest poem in the English language.

Or in a different, but related vein, people of the generations before me might have by heart some “philosophical” tags: stanzas of Edward FitzGerald’s gorgeously fatalistic and melancholy Rubáiyát; or some of the Victorian and post-Victorian poetry of existential, implicitly or explicitly agnostic moral uplift, such as Kipling’s “If”, or W. E. Henley’s “Invictus”, (“Out of the night that covers me,/ Black as the pit from pole to pole”, said Mr Poppik, the man who delivered seltzer to our apartment, “I thank whatever gods may be/ For my unconquerable soul”).

Finally, and more widely known than either of the first two categories, there were sentimental verse narratives, elegiac and nostalgic, like “The Old Oaken Bucket”—a copy of which is found on the body of the man who throws himself into the threshing-machine in Willa Cather’s *My Antonia*. “Casey at the Bat”, which is extremely elegiac and nostalgic toward its small-town past, is a journalistic and vaudevillian example of this genre, and Longfellow’s *Hiawatha* is a high-culture, literary example. (Robert Frost’s poem “Directive” is the greatest modernist variation on this genre.)

I suppose that this presence of poetry, thin but distinct, in the minds of the adults I knew can be credited to an American conception of democracy, that is, to American public schools in the spirit of John Dewey. Practical yet high-minded, those schools found a place for poetry in the education, and social integration, of the offspring of immigrants and farmers and workers: poetry as ornamental language, as medicinal, uplifting language to replace a waning religious certainty, and as a narrative expression, thereby containment, of grief for a lost, innocent past.

This cultural pond which I have tried to sketch should not itself be the object of our nostalgia. Fairly shallow and quickly evaporating, it had become cut off from its sources in the nineteenth century past. In the Protestant country’s towns and cities, on the Fourth of July, people used to gather around bandstands for the purpose—so I learned in graduate school—of hearing not so much fireworks or band concerts as patriotic speeches, which invariably quoted and borrowed swatches of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. John Hollander’s monumental new anthology of nineteenth-century American verse shows how deeply poetry permeated the culture, and how entirely Milton permeated the poetry.

Cut off from that past in one direction, in another the backwater body of poetry I now and then heard was additionally severed, being cut off, too, from the upper-middle-class culture. In the “high” culture of salons (still extant), and of quarterlies, galleries and universities, the nineteenth-century canon of Mr Poppik had already, decades before, been displaced and discredited by the onslaught of Modernism. The eloquence of Gray and FitzGerald, though it may have indelibly formed the taste of the Modernists Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot themselves, had in another sense been banished, though we can of course hear its echo in the contemporary high-style writing of, say, W. S. Merwin, just as there may be some ghost of secular moral uplift in Gary Snyder or of nostalgia for lost innocence in John Ashbery. Styles in a kind of writing change more rapidly than the needs they fill.

In sweeping away sentimentality and softness, as I was taught in college that they did, Pound and Eliot do not appear to have had in mind the

sweeping-away of the upper-middle-class audience. When Pound titled a prose piece "The Constant Preaching to the Mob"—the point of the piece is to discredit "the lie" that Anglo-Saxon poets or Homer performed their "lordly art" for the amusement of ordinary folk and warriors at dinner-time—he had in mind a large, if genteel, "mob" of cultivated readers. Pound's dictum that the artist supplies the antennae of the race implies such readers.

Whether such a "mob" of readers existed; whether Pound and Eliot had to leave America for London in order to find a cultural setting, rigidly stratified by class, where poetry was attended to by the upper classes; whether they went to London in order to invent the figment of such a culture; whether contemporary nostalgists are sentimental in imagining some supposed heyday of poetry in America—these are interesting questions, but not essential to my subject, which at this point is my generation's experience of their work and its social context as presented by both Pound and Eliot.

The firm sense of a leisure-class poetry audience is more obvious in Eliot's essays, and from the Eliot persona, than with Pound, who liked to boast that his ancestors the Loomises were very well known horse thieves in New York State. But Pound was also related to Longfellow, on his mother's side, and was taken to Venice at the age of twelve: that is, he was a member of the American provincial elite. The flamboyant rhetoric of his early journalism is that of an insurgent, but not an invader; it is a raucous insider who writes in 1918:

As for the nineteenth century, with all respect to its achievements, I think we shall look back upon it as a rather blurry, messy sort of a period, a rather sentimentalistic, mannerish sort of a period. I say this without any self-righteousness, with no self-satisfaction.

Possibly this assumption—of being inside a literary culture in which poetry commands significant attention, and exerts considerable force—provides the story of Modernism with some of its enduring power and allure, underlying the more obvious appeal in the idea of a revolution sweeping clean.

Power and allure such passages certainly had for me when I first read them in college. Like many Americans, I read this modernist denunciation of the overthrown Nineteenth Century with a thrill of assent, as a knowing recruit, at virtually the same moment as I was beginning to acquaint myself with the thing overthrown—or maybe not at the same moment, maybe even a little before. To put it differently, many of us learned simultaneously to be intoxicated by the Yeats of "He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven"—improvising an imagined former immersion in such art, like

delighted millionaires buying the ancestors with the country home—and de-toxed by the later Yeats of “Sailing to Byzantium”, a poem that for a time became poetry itself for me.

With a thrill perhaps related to the attraction of deconstruction for a later generation of students, at college in the late fifties and early sixties I discovered the great mainstream of Romantic eloquence behind the puddle of snatches and chestnuts I knew as a child, at the same time as I was in some imaginary way disclaiming that eloquence—“blurry, messy”—through the surrogates of Pound, Eliot, late Yeats, Williams, Stevens.

These are complicated transactions. The nineteenth century, for example, was about to be rehabilitated by critical fashion, and the nineteenth century core of the Modernists to be anatomized. Though the social attitudes of many Modernists are reactionary—snobbish, anti-Semitic, provincial, even fascistic—they could be perceived as welcoming first-generation newcomers to “high culture” because they disrupted that culture by despising certain pillars of it, and because the gentility or complacency of the displaced Georgian poetry, especially to urban Americans, seemed inherently anti-democratic. The narrative of revision and overthrow, itself, lets air into the perceived culture.

Modernism offered a way to join the club, in a variation on Groucho’s joke, and to disclaim it: or conversely, and more personally, a way to feel both loyal and superior to my father beaming as he chanted a forced-memorization fragment, “Great God! I’d rather be/ A pagan suckled in a creed outworn!” (I wish I could remember which Jewish friend of mine recounts how while reading that poem one day he realized with a sudden shock that he was a pagan suckled in a creed outworn.) It seemed possible, in other words, to attempt to write a poem that might be both part of poetry in English, and part of oneself.

It is important to say at this point that none of this would have any meaning if it were not based on great works of art. When I was a freshman in college I typed out the poem “Sailing to Byzantium” and taped it to the wall over my toaster:

O sages standing in God’s holy fire  
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,  
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,  
And be the singing-masters of my soul.  
Consume my heart away; sick with desire  
And fastened to a dying animal  
It knows not what it is; and gather me  
Into the artifice of eternity.

*“Consume my heart away: sick with desire/ And fastened to a dying animal/ It knows not what it is: and gather me/ Into the artifice of eternity.”* This retains a majesty not to be explained, but in the context of my present subject I think that part of its power for me was and is the universalizing gesture: the soul is tied to a dying thing, and does not itself know what it is, but those mortifications also betoken that the soul struggles toward a destiny unencompassed by any terms it has ever heard or seen: explosive as a meaning in Sign bursting “out of a body.” That struggle, toward something specific but mysterious—“the artifice of eternity”—anchors the noble sweep of the triads: near the beginning, “Whatever is begotten, born, and dies”; and at the end, “Of what is past, or passing, or to come.”

Yeats’s “holy city”, being at least half pagan, embodies a spiritual center that is not Christian nor Jewish nor anything quite under the sun. It embodies the nineteenth century religion of art, in other words, presented in modernist terms. For English-speaking readers coming into the great literature of the language from groups previously outside it, outside by virtue of circumstances like geography or social class or race or politics, that holy city of art, in this work and in others—“Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man” for example—has been a transforming presence: fresh for all its ties to the remote past, exhilarating, made out of the language used every day since childhood as casually as dimes and nickels, austere challenging —“lordly”, to borrow another Poundian term—in ways independent of such matters as, for example, the this-worldly opinions and outlook of William Butler Yeats.

As an evocation of that lordly presence or holy city, “Sailing to Byzantium” contains the most cogent critique possible of Creative Writing courses:

Nor is there singing school but studying  
Monuments of its own magnificence.

I think of those two lines whenever I think about my profession of teaching writing. These terms are quite absolute—as absolute as the neglect shown by “*all*” in the country of begetting, birth and death toward “monuments”, a word whose repetition, especially in comparison to the delicate enameled gold bird, has an unsettling funerary or civic quality. The older poetry in Yeats’s mind must have included Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”, a monument which was itself written by a member of the urban lower class who heard the nightingale singing not at an English country estate or in Fiesole, but outside a friend’s house in Hampstead. Our first sense of Yeats’s transformation may be to emphasize artifice, the change from Keats’s hidden, live nightingale to a mechanical bird displayed on a branch; but another aspect

of his transformation is to introduce the city omitted from Keats's poem: to make the bird part of a social space: official, splendid, courtly.

The formulation is not only uncompromising, then; it is awe-inspiring as well: the only singing school is studying monumental examples of magnificent singing. The delicate quality of the image of the bird, and the charming, intimate, Persian-miniature quality of the drowsy emperor, are balanced by the idea of a school made of magnificent monuments, with singing-masters who stand in the gold mosaic of a wall.

We can giggle a little in noting that Yeats does not say, there is no singing school but taking workshops with Derek Walcott, or there is no singing school but registering for the translation seminar, two literature courses and so forth. But in reminding me of my own belief that any study of art must depend upon attention to great examples of the practice of that art, Yeats's lines with their solemn air of the public, perhaps even the imperial, also remind me that art is not pure: the curator and transmitter of art is society.

Let me now present a small theory of creative writing, a relatively recent phenomenon, in relation to American society. When I began writing poems, there were a few writing programs at Iowa and some other schools, but they seemed a minor part of the scene. Like many of my poet friends born, like me, around 1940—Robert Hass, Frank Bidart—I attended a Ph.D. program. But beginning with people a little younger than us, something changes.

To see this watershed clearly, consider *The Harvard Book of Contemporary Poetry*, edited by Helen Vendler and published by the Harvard University Press in 1985. Until the most recent generations you could have assembled quite a respectable anthology representing American poetry of this century by including only poets who went to Harvard. I mean not only graduates like T. S. Eliot and dropouts like Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens, but recent figures as diverse as John Ashbery, Robert Bly, Robert Creeley, Donald Hall, Frank O'Hara and Adrienne Rich. An imaginary and aesthetically wide-ranging anthology that extended beyond Harvard would include such Ivy Leaguers as Allen Ginsberg (Columbia) and W. S. Merwin (Princeton), or in their generation Marianne Moore at Bryn Mawr and Ezra Pound and W. C. Williams at the University of Pennsylvania. Apparently, some kind of change occurs with the generation born after that of Adrienne Rich at Radcliffe and Sylvia Plath at Smith.

A remarkable fact about the *Harvard Book* is that of the younger poets represented, those born since 1935, not one attended college at Harvard or Radcliffe.

In fact, hardly any of the younger generation in the book attended an Eastern private college or university. This is partly coincidence, no doubt, but just the same I think that this sampling reflects the fact that American highbrow culture, though still very far from classless, is much less of a Northeastern or Ivy League property than it was just twenty or thirty years ago. Since Vendler is a strong-minded critic, not particularly populist, who made her selections according to her literary judgment, the poets in her anthology represent a reasonable sampling—that is, one that could be considered “random” in this respect. Here are the alma maters of the eleven youngest poets included, born between 1935 and 1952: Davidson College; California State College in Los Angeles; NYU; University of California, Riverside; Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey; the University of Virginia; no college degree; the University of Illinois; The State University of New York at Binghamton; “a French lycée in Rome”; and the University of Miami.

It would be laughable to suggest that this inventory represents some catalogue of the oppressed or the excluded. And no one ever said, “There is no singing school but Harvard.” But I think the list does reflect a relatively subtle but distinct social change: in region and in class, poetry like much else has been dispersed to Montana, to Iowa, to Illinois, to those prisons and schools for the blind and adult creative writing classes. It is a truism that factors like the expansion of state universities, the G.I. bill, demographic movement, have meant that many kinds of cultural goods are more widely distributed, less contained in traditional centers, than they were before World War II.

Along with many other aspects of American life, poetry is less concentrated in a region or elite—and more professionalized—than it was before. In the absence of the folk traditions or the aristocratic traditions or the cultural homogeneity another society might have, we develop more or less professional, middle-class institutions to satisfy what seems to be a fundamental hunger for the art: the MFA, the summer conference where people can work on their writing skills as if on their tennis or violin technique. What once provided a center of taste in one region and class of the country—something slightly resembling the great European capitals—has been replaced by the newer institutions, spread around the country. In the spirit of Whitman, we ought to welcome this, even if it is equally true that in the spirit of—who? Mencken or Twain?—we ought to be wary and critical as well.

The dispersal or transformation—and a nostalgic, half-conscious snobbery that resents it—may underlie some of the peculiar scorn directed at creative writing programs, and at contemporary poetry. It is



tempting merely to dismiss such scorn, especially in so far as it laments a vague or implausible good old days of poetry. Such lamenting of poetry's present state—sometimes sentimentalizing or inflating that vague utopian former day—has become a journalistic category. The authors of these pieces rarely pay convincing attention to contemporary poems, nor to the supposedly longed-for poetry of the past. From that vagueness of attention I conclude that whatever they signify—and they certainly signify something—it probably has to do with some area of feeling different from poetry itself, some social current or attitude.

I will share one particularly silly example, a sentence written by Joseph Epstein in his article “Who Killed Poetry”?, published in *Commentary*:

The crowds in London once stood on their toes to see Tennyson pass; today a figure like Tennyson probably would not like poetry and might not even read it.

Think about it—I dare you. Tennyson would not read Tennyson, if he were alive today? Is this a way of saying that Epstein does not read *In Memoriam*? Is the standing on toes of “the crowds” really Epstein's cultural touchstone? Or were they bums? How does he know what Tennyson “probably would not like”? What is “a figure like Tennyson”? If the crowds were standing around flatfooted when Hopkins or Hardy passed, does that mean the decline had set in by their day? Or—finally—did Tennyson perhaps draw a crowd for historical reasons not entirely to do with poetry? Perhaps that is what “a figure like Tennyson” means.

It is hard not to conclude that an important element here is a myth of the superior past, when edifying highbrow artifacts were popular, and their artificers rich and famous. This myth can be grafted onto crowds of Victorian celebrity-seekers or for that matter onto the sweet but unheroic quotations and fragments that were in the heads of my parents' generation. As a myth, this idea may have been more plausible in the days when American “high” culture was centered in a relatively small number of places and institutions. The author of the sentence seems to me to be half in love with the idea of popular taste as the measure of all things, and half terrified by that same idea. In the decline of an aristocratic standard of taste that he half loathes, half would like to rely on, he turns on something that he calls “poetry nowadays.”

Such gestures in other words may respond more to a half-conscious idea about the culture as a whole than they respond to actual poems, old or new. In so far as they have to do with poetry, it may be that poetry's actual diffusion—into the often ungraceful or clumsy terrain of local adult

education classes, summer conferences, creative writing classes at varying levels of distinction, poets encouraging the writing of blind or deaf children, etc.—offends the myth of its golden age.

On the other hand, however feeble or inauthentic the attacks on it may be, there are repellent elements in the institution of Creative Writing: valuable in so far as it makes the art available, as a conduit for poetry from the past to the present, Creative Writing is a blight insofar as it becomes a guild, implicitly limiting practice to certificate-bearing members, or becomes an Academy, promoting official styles and sanctioned authors. Certainly, there is something to resist as well as something to admire in the spirit of creative writing—a spirit which I'll summarize as dispersed in the provinces rather than centered in a capital, rhetorical and practical rather than scholarly, professional rather than hieratic, American rather than European, middle-class rather than aristocratic. The dispersion is in itself more noble than the elite it replaces; the guild or academy, with "poet" merely another academic job description, is more offensive than any elite.

As with many aspects of American life since World War II, the fact that the university has become a harbor for art—even the arts of jazz and cinema!—seems part of an ambiguous bargain, where heightened possibility may be bartered for lost autonomy. Does the improvised or extended institution bring a cultural good to more of us, or merely feed us a cheap imitation? Does it keep alive what our artists have made, or officially embalm it—or briskly turn away from the past, from "monuments of its own magnificence", altogether?

We can hope that as the organism of culture generates an institution, it also makes antibodies of a kind to resist it. From this viewpoint, disparate phenomena like the rise of poetry bars, with their raucous contests, and the elevation of estimable foreign writers—Miłosz, Akhmatova, Neruda, and Rilke seem to be the favorite poets of my students—can be seen as two responses counter to provincialism, to the potential for a dreary, Soviet-like poetry, chauvinistic and institutionally sanctioned.

I take it to be a kind of sacred principle that the purpose of study is in part reverence for the thing studied—beyond any benefit to us who study. Creative writing is still adjusting its relation to that principle, and doing so at a time when it is inheriting responsibilities from older forms of study. I have heard that some universities no longer have a Department of English, or a Department of French, and so forth, but a new entity called the Department of Literary Theory. The next logical step is for writing to evolve into a Department of Literary Practice.

But I began by distinguishing the meaning of poetry in culture from its meaning in art, a division that I'll return to now by trying to talk about

the meaning of poetry's form. In fact, if challenged to define what is most often or essentially lacking in the cultural institutions we Americans have improvised for poetry—from prisons to universities, from rock poetry to language poetry, from Creative Writing to Deconstruction—my answer would be an understanding of the form.

The form of an art is determined by its medium.

I have said before in writing that poetry is the most bodily of all the arts—and my friends have gently suggested that I had gotten a bit carried away: “Uh, Robert—dancing has more to do with the body, doesn't it?”

But no, I insist: the medium of poetry is not words, not even lines, not even sounds; the medium of poetry is the vibrating column of air rising up from the chest of one person, shaped inside the voice-box and inside the mouth into meaning sounds, emerging one at a time and therefore in a certain order.

That is, the medium of poetry issues from an individual body—not necessarily a gifted body, not necessarily the body of the artist. Because the medium comes from inside of the body, and because it is shaped by the artist for the ordinary person's physical presence and performance, I repeat that poetry is a physical art, indeed a bodily art, and indeed the most bodily of arts.

A poem is written to be said and heard, not necessarily by an impressive actor or by a poet who has studied self-presentation: it is a more intimate or personal form than theater, then. This explains why I have been so moved by certain performances of poems by undergraduate students in classes where I have asked everyone to have a poem ready to recite from memory. The sound of a young woman I had underestimated saying the words of Yeats's “Easter 1916” with understanding, or some student of an unlikely ethnicity shaping his breath to the intricate passion of Herbert's “Church Monuments” moves me not because I am sentimental about American students, but because I am witnessing this art in practice. The relation between the sounds of poetry and memory are especially clear when the author, like Yeats or Herbert, is long dead—the immediate intimacy of breath is combined, at such times, with the long survival of the past.

In contrast, the same set of principles explains to me why I have felt covertly bored when friends play for me their recording of Sir John Gielgud reciting Shakespeare's sonnets, or when a poet skillful infuses not very distinguished work with a lot of personal force, thrilling an audience with what is basically the art of monologue: I try to murmur politely, recognizing the performance skills, but feeling the absence of poetry's form in these presentations that proceed as though, like the poetry of *Hamlet* or

*As You Like It*, all poems were written to be fulfilled by expert performance.

If I am right, the meaning of poetry's form is extremely intimate as well as bodily; the form is also related to memory, and not only personal memory: it is cultural and historical memory as well. At this intersection of inward and outward, the form of poetry is based on the sounds of words—not as set to music or as pronounced in a special way, but as spoken—words arranged to make art of their sounds; the conventional printed notation for that art is lines. (In his important book, *The Founding of English Meter*, John Thompson says that by the Aristotelian principle that all art is imitation, what poetic rhythm imitates is the utterances of a language: lines of verse imitate sentences.) The art is not dependent on large numbers of people or elaborate equipment—unlike, say, the movies. It tends toward the scale of one body, and as a result it may be limited by a certain resistance to some means of mass presentation, and to mixed media. (I am thinking of the high-minded TV show where while an actor reads Stevens' "The Snow Man", we are shown banally artistic footage of a snow man.)

There is a social meaning to poetry's form, worth thinking about in relation to our time. To take a dramatic example of such social meaning—I hope not a melodramatic example—Czesław Miłosz relates that during the Nazi occupation of Poland poetry became more popular: even the most timid soul could feel, by carrying in a pocket a copy of some poem in Polish—a poem perhaps not even particularly political in content—that this possession was an assertion of identity, and therefore of resistance. In the presence of that monolithic, violent, totalitarian menace, a form based on the sufficiency of the individual—the sufficiency not merely of the individual itself, but the individual as bearer and instrument of a culture, in this case a national past—took on a heightened social significance.

On a less extreme level, I think that the presence of poetry, of even one poem, in a contemporary American life has comparable powers and associations: with something defiantly ungovernable, or something loyal to a certain vision of the past, or merely something personal—personal in scale, as well as in nature. This art that ranges from the lyrical to the heroic takes place in the modest, intimate theater of the reader's human voice.

Any art has social significance, if only because works imply who the art belongs to; if I am right about the form of poetry, poetry belongs to communities as a form of memory, but to individuals as a form of existence: the read or memorized or recited poem refers to the sounds of words and sentences formed in one present person's body, yet it functions as a reminder of the past. Whitman makes the great statement of this

insight: that poetry, in a single human body, can embrace multitudes and epochs.

What might such a form might mean in the context of a culture in love with mass, technological phenomena, distributed and duplicated and made available by astoundingly elegant and impressive devices? I love my CDs, my television, my computer, all my modern dazzlements: what does the form of poetry mean for me in this context?

The answer is not “nothing.” On the evidence of the many applications to the writing program where I work, and on the evidence of writer’s conferences, Poets in the Schools, and so forth—and on the evidence of my own soul—I would guess that poetry, true to its form and to its peculiar history in American culture, embodies a particular appetite for the equivalent, in art, of individual speech. It embodies the idea that in someone’s voice, forming the words and sentences we exchange all day there is the model for a form of art, with its defining place among other arts.

Sometimes we read that American poetry is in “crisis”—maybe the crisis is general, and projected onto poetry, at a moment when art in general is being redefined: professors are writing about sitcoms; Sven Birkerts is worried that electronic media are pillaging the domain of fiction; film actors are giving readings of their poetry at Chateau Marmont, creative writing seems to be simultaneously marking the end of one elite and—at its worst—spawning another.

It is dizzy-making, maybe fruitless to contemplate this “crisis” of mass and individual, elite and popular, academic and demotic. Muddling at trying to think through such tangled immensities, I realize that what I crave to hear is a voice—a voice in a poem. The single human voice—which cannot match film for spectacle, or music for glamour, or drama for ready emotion—conveys something of all of those things, along with the precious sense of human scale. Contrary to the vision of *Leaves of Grass*, poetry may not hold us together in the mass; yet we seem to carry it as the vessel of some valuable property, the property, perhaps, of our own imagination inside us. The time of its greatness is by no means over.

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