

Without Poetry We are Dead: With It We Die Living

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Theme: [History](#)

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The real end of the world is the destruction of the spirit; the other kind depends on the insignificant attempt to see whether after such a destruction the world can go on.—Karl Kraus

Most Americans dislike poetry, or at least are indifferent to it. That is probably an understatement. We live in an age of prose, of journalese, and advertising jingles. Poetry, the most directly indirect, mysterious, condensed, and passionate form of communication, is about American as socialism or not shopping. Unlike television, texting, or scrolling the Internet, it demands concentration; that alone makes it suspect. Add silent, calm surroundings and a contemplative mind, and you can forget it, which is what most people do. Silence, like so much else in the present world, including human beings, is on the endangered species list. Another rare bird—let's call it the holy spirit of true thought—is slowly disappearing from our midst.

How, for example, could a noisy mind hovering in a technological jangling begin to grasp these lines from Federico Garcia Lorca's poem *New York*?

The mountains exist. I know that
And the lenses ground for wisdom.
I know that. But I have not come to see the sky.
I have come to see the stormy blood,
the blood that sweeps the machines on to the waterfalls,
and the spirit on to the cobra's tongue.

Can you imagine telling someone in the U.S. what you did for a living was write poems? They'd look at you as if you were from outer space, some weirdo, probably a secret Russian agent, out to corrupt the youth of the land.

Long dead poets are okay in school, of course. They're safe, since what they have to say is assumed to have no direct bearing on the present. They call them classics, and force you to read and dissect a few before you can pass an English course. They sterilize them, and create immunity to their power in students. As one of our great poets and man of letters, Kenneth Rexroth, has written, "The entire educational system is in a conspiracy to make poetry as unpalatable as possible. . . . everybody is out to depoetize the youth of the land." In this regard, the schools do a terrific job. Most students graduate with the firm intent never to open another book of poems, and they don't.

There are minor exceptions to this dismal picture of schools and poetry. There is a national program in the U.S. called *Poetry Out Loud* that introduces a small percentage of high school students to poetry. It is a program that individual schools can adopt and takes place a few weeks every fall. Being voluntary, it depends on the motivation of the country's best

English teachers (my wife being one) and enlightened administrators to support. Highly motivated students choose from an extensive list of poems. They must memorize their selections, and then recite them before their respective schools. Their recitations must convey the inner meaning of the poem, and their performances are judged on that and stage presence. The winners advance from schools to counties to states to national winners. One hopes that many of these students carry a love of poetry into adult life, although I would add a few caveats: competition and performance. Great poets, while not immune to those twin vices, are primarily devoted to art as a vocation. They compose in the spirit of inspiration. Nevertheless, *Poetry Out Loud* is a positive development.

But the vast majority of students are not part of this program, which is a shame. From their meagre educations about poetry's importance to their lives, perhaps this would be the only echo they would remember: "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I took the one to the mall."

Poetry, they've learned, has no bearing on life; it's impractical, too meditative, nor will it get you a job. These words follow them to college, and their parents usually reinforce them. Poetry is not one of the highly funded and promoted STEM (Science, Technology, Education [a misnomer for schooling], and Mathematics) disciplines that will supposedly lead to the gravy train. Students' minds and emotions, following the corporatization of schooling, have been digitized. Their faces often reflect the affectless nature of the little machines they are constantly fingering and assiduously searching, as if for secret messages. They meditate on Facebook as nuns do on their rosary beads and a few poetry lovers still do on lines from Rilke:

Sometimes a man stands up during supper
and walks outdoors, and keeps on walking,
because of a church that stands somewhere in the East.

In this the young are like their poetry-avoiding parents and teachers who have not walked out but have walked into a technological labyrinth that devours their spirits—consumes them as they consume. It is no wonder that a company has been formed to study and report to the corporations on their emotions. *Affectiva* (no, not a yogurt) describes its mission as follows: "Our mission is to bring emotional intelligence to the digital world. When we digitize emotion it can enrich our technology, for work, play and life. . . . Spun out of MIT Media Lab, our company is leading the effort to emotion-enable technology. From understanding how consumers engage with digital content, to enabling developers to add emotion sensing and analytics technology to their own apps and digital experiences."

Reading faces, not poetry, is their business. They measure and analyze facial expressions of emotion with the assistance of The National Science Foundation. So they say. They have no clue that the living poems that are persons need to be pondered intimately to be known; that behind every expression is a meaning. Their manipulative stupidity is so great, and their clients' faith in technology so touching, that they both assume the outer is the inner, that faces tell the story of the spirit's truth, the living meaning of a person's heart. They read the face on the book's cover—as with Facebook—for its contents. They seem ignorant of Shakespeare or the actor's art. They are killers of the spirit and typify the anti-poetic ethos that reigns in the U.S.

Compare the technological face-readers' manipulations with the truth of these lines from Galway Kinnell's poem, "The Fundamental Project of Technology."

To de-animalize human mentality, to purge it of obsolete,
evolutionary characteristics, in particular of death,
which foreknowledge terrorizes the content of skulls with,
is the fundamental project of technology; however,
pseudologica fantastica's mechanism's require:
to establish deathlessness it is necessary to eliminate those who die;
a task attempted when a white light flashed.

Here in seven lines a poet tells us why Americans are addicted to technology and where this is leading—nuclear annihilation. He reveals the death fear at the heart of the technological obsession and its self-defeating consequences. He tells a truth few want to hear, and in doing so fulfills the age-old prophetic function of art—poetry, drama, painting, etc. Acting as "antennae of the race," in Ezra Pounds words, genuine artists grasp by their art the unconscious conflicts most prefer to avoid at their peril. In a country addicted to ingesting technologically produced mind altering drugs and to being consumed by machines, it is no wonder that poetry is considered irrelevant.

In many other countries, poets are held in high esteem and their poems affect people's lives; people know their national poets' work by heart. The Russians know Pushkin; the Irish can recite Yeats; the Chileans revere Neruda. They find hope and joy and the passion to resist oppression in their verses. Their poets take them to places where passionate love of the world can be awakened in their hearts and minds. In the U. S. they are ignored, at best. Why bother with them is the unspoken assumption. What good is poetry? We have our machines.

And if by some small chance Americans do bother, they find that a great deal of what passes for poetry is worthless drivel churned out according to formula by "creative writing" students and their mentors who have carved out a safe place for themselves in American colleges. Behind a façade of seeming profundity and studied ambiguity hides a nihilism that can best be described as a bad joke. Much of this academic poetry is just plain trivial, devoid of ideas and any lived encounter with world events that so deeply influence our lives. So much of it is solipsistic in the extreme—"selfies" in verse written from within a bubble.

I will elide Hallmark poetry at the risk of ridicule.

There are, however, many profound and wonderful contemporary poets, and it is a shame they are not read. They work in the shadows. They are not household names as in the past when literature meant something to Americans and they weren't despondently depressed and drugged into a zombie-like passivity. Perhaps this is because, as the philosopher/psychologist Rollo May puts it, "The poet's way is the opposite to the opaque, placid life. In authentic poetry we find a confrontation which does not involve repression nor covering up nor sacrifice of passion in order to avoid despair, nor any of the other ways most of us use to avoid direct acknowledgment of our destiny."

In an age of constant death and war and smiling killers sitting in the White House, who seeks out today's Kenneth Rexroth? "Thou Shalt Not Kill" was written in the "placid" 1950s. One verse follows.

You,
The hyena with the polished face and bow tie,
In the office of a billion dollar
Corporation devoted to service;
The vulture dripping with carrion,
Carefully and carelessly robed in imported tweeds,
Lecturing on the Age of Abundance;
The jackal in double-breasted gabardine,
Barking by remote control,
In the United Nations;
The vampire bat seated at the couch head,
Notebook in hand, toying with his decerebrator;
The autonomous, ambulatory cancer,
The Superego in a thousand uniforms;
You, the finger man of behemoth,
The murderer of the young men.

The work of our best poets confronts us with our deepest anxieties and the questions that hover over our lives like a held breath. Since the late 19th century, our finest poets and thinkers have devoted themselves to the Herculean task of undercutting the false distinction between thought and emotion (passions being a more inclusive word) that has been a mainstay, not only of rationalism and romanticism, but of the way we live. This invalid distinction goes back to Plato, who wanted poetry banned because he said it was imitative and did not possess ideas, as philosophy did. He said poetry was irrationally emotional and dealt in illusions.

This critique of poetry is paralleled at the individual level by the saying, “I know that intellectually, but emotionally . . .”—as if emotions were irrational and seize one like a worry dog seizes a duck shot by a hunter. This belief results in people becoming victims of their emotions, and victims of poetry and the arts that are assumed to be devoid of ideas. This schizoid attitude lies at the heart of issues of faith and responsibility that plague our times, and it is against this ongoing myth that the most astute poets aim their art.

This effort is linked to the increasingly widespread disbelief in the reality of the objective world and the growing acceptance of the idea of the “social construction of reality” (even if one never heard of the term), an idea co-terminus with the movement from modern to “postmodern society” and the development of sophisticated technologies of mind control. It has led to the devaluation of our senses, our divorce from the reality of the natural world, and the diminution of direct personal experience. While understanding how powerful elites manipulate “reality,” perception can lead to liberating truth, it has primarily led to widespread skepticism and confusion as technology has grown exponentially more sophisticated and the modern corporate state’s propaganda machines have utilized it with lies and deceptions in the service of empire. When people believe that “everything is relative” and socially constructed, the assumption that there are no facts or truths seeps into public consciousness and corrupts people’s sense of reality at the deepest level. It is soul murder. Of course, that “everything is relative” is an absolute statement that contradicts itself is usually lost on true believers. Or is it true doubters?

Modern propaganda is reality construction. People like Dick Cheney and his innumerable ilk throughout the U.S. government bluntly crow that while others may report the facts, they create them—they create reality and what people think is reality. Then their stenographers in the mainstream corporate media report this created reality that most distracted, hypnotized, and ignorant Americans take for reality.

Harold Pinter succinctly said the following about all the countless war crimes committed by the United States while the American people were deluded into thinking otherwise: “It never happened. Nothing ever happened. Even while it was happening it wasn’t happening. It didn’t matter. It was of no interest.”

So what at first glance may seem a small issue of concern only to poets and assorted eggheads, should be of momentous importance to everyone. The poet’s dilemma is actually everyone’s. Against a steady devaluation of the created world—the real content of poetry—the poet’s fight is against the heightened emphasis on pure form over content, as if the world existed as a palette for one’s inward paintings, a recording of precious images, stylistic performances, or fake news.

I am not arguing that poetry and all the arts should be didactic or political tracts. Far from it.

No Theory

No theory will stand up to a chicken’s guts
being cleaned out, a hand rammed up
to pull out the wriggling entrails,
the green bile and the bloody liver;
no theory that does not grow sick
at the odor escaping.—David Ignatow

Poetry is the search for truth. It marries outer to inner. It probes reality with words. It suggests, states, intimates, all the while inviting the reader to enter into a raid on what was previously unspeakable. This exploration is composed of ideas, images, and words arranged in ways that engender powerful emotions and thoughts. Like life, a poem swims in mystery. Sometimes it carries a tune that moves the words, and the reader is moved in return. Sometimes it is out of tune to jar the reader out of a life of complacency with no questions asked, no disruptions. True poetry startles. It inspires. It enlivens.

It is a distillation of the human spirit, as essential as bread. It is composed of a few simple ingredients, as is bread. They are: the real, actually existing, outside world, and us; the outside world that we are in and that is in us, and our emotional thoughts about our condition. Flour, water, and yeast. The bread rises, the poem forms. They are good or bad, depending on taste. They nourish or don’t. But we cannot live without them. Thomas McGrath writes:

On the Christmas white plains of the floured and flowering kitchen table
The holy loaves of bread are slowly being born:
Rising like low hills in the steeped pastures of light-
Lifting the prairie farmhouse afternoon on their arching backs.

While academic hucksters churn out reams of solipsistic verse of hallucination and artifice, our true poets passionately address issues that count and should be of concern to the average person: questions of value and ultimate concern, of life and death, of meaning or meaninglessness, of truth and lies.

In a screen and selfie culture, these matters are irrelevant.

In a robotized world, technology is king.

Great poets say otherwise.

If such poetry needs a defense, let me leave the final words to Caroline Forche, an authentic poet if there ever were one. The following is from her poem "Ourselves or Nothing" and cuts to the heart of the matter.

There is a cyclone fence between
Ourselves and the slaughter and behind it
We hover in a calm protected world like
Netted fish, exactly like netted fish.
It is either the beginning or the end
Of the world, and the choice is ourselves or nothing.

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