

## THE LOVE OF POETRY

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In sixth grade English, Mr. X required each of us to memorize Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade", and recite it in front of class. Mr. X stood just behind us, gripping a yardstick. For every flubbed line, we got a sharp whack across the shoulders.

Mine was a boys' private school, in Minnesota (the same academy attended 20 years before by poet Allen Grossman). Blake was a prep school modeled on the high-toned English tradition. Poetry, then, presented a kind of duplex Janus-face. On one hand, it was naturalized as a mode of expression for heroic ideals (Tennyson's more manly patriotic poems were a touchstone). On the other, there was something faintly disreputable about poets and poetry. Poets could be "effeminate". And to be effeminate, in a boys' prep school in the early 1960s, was taboo. Any sign of weakness or effeminacy was cruelly mocked and scorned. Not by everyone; indeed, there were kind and sympathetic students, even among the so-called jocks. But it was a general law of that time and culture to mark out the effeminate as contemptible, perverse.

The question of the place of poetry in that era is more nuanced, however. Poetry was honored by the manly role-models, as well as the risible quacks, among our schoolteachers. My own father and grandfathers often recited bits of Longfellow and Tennyson at odd moments; these represented a small, deeply-normal accent amid the sparkle of everyday conversation. Nor was the recitation gauntlet set up by Mr. X my first introduction to poetry. I composed my first poem at age 4, before I could write it down : my father (at whom the poem was fired) managed to write it down on a small cardboard key-card as he rushed out the door on his way to work. Fifty years later, my mother sent me the card, with a note about its provenance. The poem goes :

Play, play!  
It's time to play!  
Play all day,  
that's what I say!  
Your work is done,  
come out in the sun!

Play, play, play!

Clearly my workaholic, harried father, in that moment, recognized and valued poetry enough to write one poem down, and save it for 50 years.

Edwin Honig, that formidable 20th-century American poet and translator, once wrote in a National Endowment of the Arts brochure, for the Poetry-in-the-Schools program : “Poetry is a buzzing in the air. It’s everywhere. Poets hear that sound, and write it down.” Growing up in the 1950s and 60s, poetry was naturalized and acclimated and absorbed through the mediation of all kinds of cultural institutions. The hymns, prayers and psalms we heard in church introduced us to the majestic sounds of the Bible. The folk songs and stories we heard in summer camp instilled in us their melodic moral meanings. Even the silly jingles and skits we watched (and imitated) on cartoons and television normalized the presence of poetry in our lives. So it came as no great shock, it represented no watershed of cultural alienation, when, by 6th or 7th grade, we began to learn that there were these constellations of great and famous poets – some of them even American; that poetry, for some, was clearly a distinct talent and calling. By 8th and 9th grade, with the onset of adolescence, we began to cast the world in a cynical, satirical light; yet nevertheless there was no denying that, for some of us anyway, there was a keen pleasure to be found in reading poems, endeavoring to decipher their meaning, their import. I remember the pure joy delivered by an anthology designed for young people titled *A Gift of Watermelon Pickle*, and how I adored e.e. cummings’ poem “In Just- Spring”, and chose it for my own memorization assignment. The fact that I failed in my presentation – not because I couldn’t remember the poem, but because I dissolved in uncontrollable giggles brought on by the very comic essence of such recitals – was not a sign of what Ben Lerner calls “the hatred of poetry”. It was rather an illustration of the “imperfection of delivery” – the fact that a vast, infinite, Rabelaisian, hilarious social chaos envelopes every mode of theatre or public offering. If something can go wrong, it will go wrong.

So the presence of poetry in those days was complex; deeply ingrained in ordinary life, but also touched by homophobia and male chauvinism, intensified by adolescent rites of passage (doubly-pressurized in the stuffy rooms of an all-boys’ school). Art in general has always been slightly suspect in Puritanical, workaholic America. A real man works hard for a living. What is a novel, a poem? What does it do? Its effects are ineffable – they are currents in the mind, the emotions, the spirit.

These are better left to the authorized religious communities anyway; save them for the Sabbath, when we do no real work.

These shibboleths had their effects on me, as well. I was a precocious writer; beginning with neighborhood journalism at around age 12, moving on to stories and proto-novels, and finally to poetry, I had already made my mark in school by the 9th grade – I made a name for myself as the “writer”. My speech to the senior class was a long poem. I was accepted into the class of 1970 at Brown University on the basis of some imitations of the New York School poets, John Ashbery, Ted Berrigan, et al., who were my heroes at that time. Yet, paradoxically, the closer I approached the actual adult vocation of “poet” (in scare quotes), the more troubled I became. As Lerner points out, the confession that one is a professional poet often elicits bemused, patronizing, or antagonistic reactions. The practical purpose of poetry for the laborious world is hard to determine. So the realization that one is a poet is perhaps the ultimate vocational challenge. I myself had a nervous breakdown over it, at age 20. I thought Shakespeare was writing directly to me. The impression that I was losing my marbles terrified me, drove me into a manic state for a time, and caused me to renounce poetry and literature altogether for about five years. I had found God, or God had found me – rescued me from my own breakdown; for years I found it difficult to reconcile the art of poetry with the spiritual authority of Scripture. Over time I’ve come to understand that what I went through was a kind of acting-out of a classic dilemma of Puritan America. Eventually I was able to find my way back to writing; but the crisis was not spurred by the “hatred of poetry” in Lerner’s sense – it was the outcome of a love of poetry so strong as to bring me to the edge of the deepest fractures in the American psyche : between beauty and usefulness, between being and doing, between physical power and spiritual meekness.

Ben Lerner (in “The Hatred of Poetry”) acknowledges the powerful, obscure magnetism of the bardic vocation, leading the poet into all manner of tragicomic encounters in the mundane world. And yet, ironically, the disenchanted melody of Lerner’s thesis tends to replicate rather than confront the underlying contradiction. The essay is symptomatic of the current state of our poetry : a threnody for the career poet, one who has negotiated the articulated structures of American literary accreditation and professional status, at the expense of the inner freedom of the poetic drive itself. Lerner’s argument rests on a defining philosophical duality, drawn in different ways from Plato and Allen Grossman. For Plato the material world is a degraded replica of the spiritual world of ideas;

poetry is dangerous in that it celebrates, and seduces us into enjoying, that bowdlerization of the Real we call experience. For Grossman, shaped as he was by an austere, post-Holocaust, post-theistic sense of human perversity and imperfection, the truth resides in two principles, which in turn shape Lerner's essay : 1) the written poem is always a bad copy of the poetic spirit in the mind; and 2) poetry is always mediated by institutions : it is a product of schools, and therefore a fundamentally secondary, as opposed to original, phenomenon.

Lerner cites poets and thinkers from the centuries between Plato and Grossman (Sidney, Shelley, Keats, Dickinson) in support of his thesis that "the hatred of poetry" ultimately stems from our inability to adequately express, in written lines, the perfection of the poetic thought itself. The poem is always a slightly-contemptible failure; the poet is a maker of damaged knock-offs. Perfect Good or Perfect Beauty are unattainable in the material world; thus our efforts to do so only betray the immaculate ideal.

Yet the two main streams which, in an intellectual fusion, fed the growth of western culture, propose a very different way of seeing the world and understanding art and poetry. I refer to Aristotle, on the one hand, and the immanentist Judeo-Christian tradition, on the other. Aristotle's philosophy is designed around the central notion of telos, or "end". All natural beings and human constructs have each their distinct character, purpose, quiddity : which is to achieve their telos, to activate their potential, to fulfill what they are. Thus the concept of perfection is not purely ineffable or ideal – it is rather that normative state which all physical beings strive toward. For Judaism, too, moral perfection pointed toward a radically immanent goal : the Promised Land. The Christian doctrine of its fulfillment on earth in the Man-God was only an intensification or metamorphosis of the Judaic aim. "You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect," asserts Jesus. The kingdom of God is becoming manifest on earth; this is the messianic telos.

Both the normative position of Aristotle and the radical claims of Judeo-Christianity meet in the notion of a beneficent Creation, the earth as perfectible creative image of its divine source. This is the ur-rhyme of western culture, the major chord. The dissonance, skepticism and disenchantment of modern and postmodern culture reflects a loss of faith in this original world-picture.

Lerner's essay does not delve into these obscure regions of theology, but they are relevant to his thesis, which is built around Grossman's "bitter logic" of a defining alienation – between mind and matter, imagination and expression, spirit and letter. I would suggest, in contrast, a "sweet logic" – that what draws a poet to her vocation are two things : 1) the encounter with the provisional perfection of actual poems, and 2) the inner experience of creative imagination – the sense of a power to make a poem of one's own.

Poetic talent is a gift; every authentic poet will acknowledge this. The poem is an unaccountable spark of invention, a discovery – the poet is thus "inspired" to make a new and vivid intellectual complex of words, images, sounds, ideas. Yet one can see how, in Ben Lerner's mournful, disillusioned world, such inspiration might be hard to come by. What did Wallace Stevens say? "One must become an ignorant man again." The poem is a kind of uncanny natural-intellectual force – how we come to terms with that, whether we naively accept it or theorize it out of existence, depends in part on our basic worldview. I think Aristotle might say that achieved works of art are "perfections of their kinds". I think Jesus might suggest that beautiful and free creations glorify their ultimate, unaccountable Source. My own experience with poetry leads me to believe that the expressions of artistic humility he cites – in Keats, Dickinson – and one could add Eliot, and many others – evoke a simple geometric diagram, acknowledging the distance between finite perfection (the poem itself) and infinite perfection (the source of all poems). They are not evidence for poetry's inherent mediocrity; they are another facet of the makers' over-arching, lifelong devotions of praise and gratitude. They are part of that general love of poetry, that "buzzing in the air", from which all moving, powerful stanzas emerge and shine.