

Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Poetry

by Bill Zavatsky

I

Perhaps the last time you really came into close contact with poetry was for a college or graduate school term paper. You haven't had the time or the inclination to "keep up" with poetry since then, and have found yourself avoiding the teaching of it, if you can, or gritting your teeth through the "poetry unit" when it rolls around each year. Most teachers I've met and worked with are in the same boat. Oh, they like poetry well enough, but their raids into twentieth century verse inevitably send them back to those few dependable poems neatly compartmentalized in the school textbooks.

That the art of poetry has become little more than "filler" in many school texts—like those odd items wedged in the daily paper that report hailstones the size of cannonballs in Missoula—is such a truism that it's boring to discuss. For most teachers (and for all too many students) The Poem has become a sideshow item, a species of literary anomaly that one walks hurriedly past with eyes half turned away, muttering, "How interesting. . . ."

How this happened to poetry remains a debatable and complicated question, and I don't know how head-on it has been confronted in print. Literary critics write for university professors, poets don't really want to acknowledge the situation (and most couldn't talk about it if they wanted to), and the teacher trying to make sense of what went awry between "Oh Captain, My Captain" and *The Waste Land* shakes his or her head and makes a beeline for the Big Top—prose. There, at least, things usually make sense. The aerialists continue to be daring, the elephants charming, the acrobats skillful, and the clowns are permitted their bouts of controlled nonsense. Little resembles the odd and inexplicable world we have thankfully escaped, of giants, transparent ladies, seal-boys, and half-men/half women. Like the predictable pleasures of the main arena, school anthology prose whisks away those discomfiting freaks of poetry. Reality, good old sentence-by-sentence reality, driving hard through the plot, assumes its rightful place in the spotlight. What a relief to understand what the writer is talking about, what he *means*! As for poetry, why, we can always take refuge in the classics. What we forget is that Shelley and Byron and Keats were legendary freaks in their own time, generally impaled by critics and deemed incomprehensible. Time, which tames all but the wildest of lions, has tamed them, too. The poetry of all but the very greatest of poets (and I include the three writers that I have just mentioned in that company) eventually turns into a kind of prose. Certainly the bad poetry of great poets does. But great poetry is like Blake's tyger—untamable. From its burning eye we flee, and usually our flight is a retreat into meaning.

Contemporary poetry, that is, poetry written by living poets or written in the recent past, is the biggest headache of all. And the biggest complaint about it is: "I can't figure out what this poet is talking about. What does this *mean*?" The Hunt for the Meaning has become institutionalized as "Appreciation of Poetry 101." Year after year this goes on, until finally (somewhere in college) we are confronted with that terror of terrors, that event we always fear would happen: the poem has grown so complicated, so ornery, that we find it impossible to put together what we have so industriously "analyzed." We give up! What a relief, what a fantastically lucky breakdown! Never again will we have to list the "sources" of *The Waste Land*; never again will we be asked What the Red Wheelbarrow Symbolizes in Williams's little poem; nevermore will we be faced with the unfathomable references in Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. It is finished, thank God! We have graduated!

From the poet's end of it, this Hunt for the Symbol means the death of poetry. Would you discuss the movements of a ballerina by taking your students to an anatomy class and have them watch leg muscles being dissected? It might help to understand the twists and turns, but dead parts don't get up and dance. Neither does the poem after autopsy. The poetry-by-autopsy method may be seen in action in most high school English classes studying Shakespeare. The Bard is picked clean, and *Hamlet*, the fierce and philosophical dramatic poem, crashes to the stage in a pile of bones, all curiously resembling scansion marks. Shakespeare has died more deaths than any of his bloody characters, either because he wrote in blank verse, a kind of windup ta-BOOM, ta-BOOM machine that can be scored, or in spite of it, in which case the Hunt for the Meaning is on, and poetry be damned. In "interpreting" poetry too many teachers have forgotten the great unwritten law of its mathematics: a good poem is always more than the sum of its parts. It is first and last the document of a human experience.

Let me put it another way. The same sensibility that kicks poems around until they stand up like man and *mean* also flattens butterflies under glass and mounts animal heads on den walls. I am not sentimentalizing. I am not being the dreamy, wishy-washy thinker that poets are expected to be. When wildness is once and for all nailed, it becomes an ornament with trophy status. When all the mystery is crushed out of a poem, when its wings are pinned forever, when it no longer makes weird noises in the night, when it has grown harmless in the collection book of the school text, the poem will have attained the state of perfect meaning which is death. It becomes another prize in a landscape of stuffed birds. The saddest part of this education, for students and teachers alike, is that it's much easier to trap a stuffed bird than to skin your knees chasing a live one. We train ourselves by this method of "analysis" to seek out examples of poetry that, because of their museum-piece status, are safe stuffed owls. This accounts for the preponderance of so much bad poetry even in anthologies that seem to be searching for something so much better, collections like *Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle* and *Some Haystacks Don't Even Have Any Needle*. Most books of this kind display the same old trophies, leaking sawdust, gussied up with a veneer of contemporary typefaces and flashy layout.

My point is that poetry lives now, and *now* can be as confusing as this morning's headlines. How does one "interpret" the kidnappings, the indictments of public officials, the senseless killings, the soon-to-be extinct bird, the oil well somebody wants to

put on a football field, the untimely rains? *Now* is poetry territory—dangerous, infested, infectious, maddening. We'd much prefer to click off Dan Rather in mid-sentence than force ourselves to pull all the mayhem together. But if a poem does not fully partake of the *now* of its author's life, it will never survive that moment, and it will never penetrate the heart of the reader. *Now* is also the territory of what is truly alive, fresh, delightfully unpredictable, thrilling, joyous.

Because of this engagement with the *now*, whatever that *now* may mean to him or her, the poet has often been typed as a loony, a misfit, a dreamer, or a plain waster-of-time. Poets have certainly been all of these things, and more. But no more so than others who have never written a line. Some of the weirdest people I have ever known I met in a factory where I worked in the yard gang and as a janitor when I was eighteen. None of them wrote poetry or read it.

While an Eliot or a Pound may drive readers away with their difficulty, other poets find themselves dismissed as "unpoetic" because of their straightforward clarity. I will never forget the reaction of one teacher during a workshop that I was giving at a Brooklyn school. I was trying to stress that many recent poets have worked hard to bring everyday American speech into their work, and read the following poem by William Carlos Williams:

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 [1]

"But that sounds just like my husband!" cried one of the teachers. "You mean to stand there and tell me that *that's a poem?*"

Indeed I did. In my private scenario, Williams had eaten the plums, left a note in the empty bowl in the icebox, and had started to climb the stairs to bed when, in a flash of intuition that I am willing to call genius, he stopped himself and ran back downstairs to retrieve the poem he knew he had just written. [2] Unlike the upset teacher, Williams saw no line dividing his activity as a poetry from his life as a human being. In "This Is Just to Say," he captured one of the daily experiences that are as liable to poetic treatment as any other, and he knew it. Rescuing this short, scribbled testament to married life and household order (as well as to temptation), he made permanent a poetic act of the first magnitude.

Another poet whose preoccupation with everyday life cast his literary career into obscurity was Charles Reznikoff (1894-1976). In poem after poem this writer captured the essence of city life in language so clear and simple that it could be mistaken for prose. Like Williams, Reznikoff is a master of the seemingly insignificant encounter, the anecdotal experiences all of us have but fail to write down:

Due to copyright restrictions, we are unable to include the poem "The new janitor is a Puerto Rican" by Charles Reznikoff. We apologize for the inconvenience. [3]

Reznikoff does not spare us the hard facts. After all, he has to live in this apartment house where nothing gets fixed properly. But on the level of human interaction, his poem is full of compassion. He understands the despair of the young janitor, and in his clarity of approach to the subject, makes us feel it, too.

Williams and Reznikoff wrote hundreds of poems fashioned directly from their daily lives. Williams could have established his physician's practice in New York City or in Paris, but chose instead to set up in Rutherford, New Jersey, where he was born and where he died. Reznikoff lived most of his life on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, walked the streets for miles every day, wrote articles on the law to make a living, and published most of his books himself. Through work like theirs, teachers who are willing to chance the unfamiliar will discover much that they can bring to their students which concerns the human heart.

II

There must be as many reasons why poetry is written as there are poets writing it. Surely poets means to tell us something about themselves and their world, if only in the most oblique ways, by recording what they deem important enough to pluck from their field of vision with a pen point. This field of vision contains both the inner and outer lives of the writer. Some poets prefer to concentrate on the reality that exists independently of themselves—the "real world" we call it, of people, places, and things. By selecting what they do select to present to us, they tell us who they are. Other poets seem to exist completely in their own spiritual interiors. The world "out there" pales in comparison to their inner lives, their thoughts and feelings. Trees and people seem to exist only as comments on what is taking place inside them. We can call the first group "extroverts," the second "introverts," if we wish. Whatever the poet's attitude toward himself and the world may be, there is a continual struggle

within him to be true to his own vision. Teachers and students should be aware of it. To seize her vision in language as accurately as she can, the poet takes chances, stabs in the dark of the world and the self, both of which are finally unknowable. Teachers and students should likewise be aware of this chance-taking so essential to the making of any art. The French poet Paul Valéry claimed that a poem is never finished, only abandoned. The poet, then, can never be positive he has got it down "right" for all time. In this light, how much more careful should those who study poetry be in fixing "final" interpretations to poems. In fact, the virtue of a great poem is that it can be interpreted inexhaustibly, from generation to generation, century to century, and even from culture to culture. No one has stopped writing about the *Odyssey*; the last word on *Hamlet* has yet to be said. The poem reads us as much as we read the poem.

A great work of art, like the figures on Keats's Grecian urn, is an artifact of time, yet timeless. This is exactly why those cut-and-dried interpretations of poems we present to our students turn them away from the life of poetry, a life which is intimately connected to the mysteries of the human soul. Instead of facing the poem as a living document of human experience (Keats studying the urn in the British Museum, Williams looking out the window at the red wheelbarrow), the "symbols" of the poem are served up for memorization and regurgitation—for the final exam. Instead of being an encounter with feeling, poetry becomes a task like places and dates. As teachers of poetry, and as students of these methods, we have paid dearly. A vehicle of wonderment that should draw us closer has been turned into simply another academic job. Is it any wonder that I have seen third and fourth graders, who don't know the first thing about poetry, cry "Ugggh!" when the word was mentioned?

I want to suggest that students be allowed to discover a poem. Rather than having it force-fed to them, there is a way of reading a poetic text that will allow both teacher and student to encounter it as something living. At first I am going to generalize about this method; then I am going to proceed to a specific reading of a poem that I have walked through with classes that have ranged from third grade to high school to teacher workshops.

The first idea I have of how to offer a poem to students is for the teacher to make sure that he or she *likes* the poem that will be discussed. We like lots of things without being able to intellectualize about them—olives, the clouds, music. Some things (poems included) we can speak quite feelingly and intelligently about right off the bat. There might even be only one little phrase or line in a poem that we like, but that can be a place to begin. (And by the way, this is why it is important for teachers to read poetry that *isn't* in the school anthologies. If you hate all the William Carlos Williams poems in your textbook, there are hundreds of poems to choose from that he wrote. Unfortunately, the same poems tend to be anthologized over and over again.)

As a teacher presenting a poem to students for the first time, one must be humble and curious. The humility comes in the intentional holding back of one's own interpretation of the poem at hand and realizing that the poem can never be completely understood. It is a salutary thing for students to hear their teacher say, "I like this poem, but I don't really know what this part of it means," when we really *don't*. Some poems can be investigated exhaustively; others, completely or in part, leave us baffled. The first important step in humanizing the study of poetry is to recognize this. We cannot always explain what attracts us—in poetry or in life. "Why do you love me?" says the husband to the wife. Beyond what can be put into words, we must be silent.

Usually the admission by the teacher that he is not omnipotent will send the students rushing to the rescue. They want to help; they have their own wonderful ideas about what the confusing passage means. This is where we learn from our students, and as any good teacher knows, this is one of the great gifts of the profession.

In discussion one must be curious enough to hear the students out, to let them have their say. Humility again comes into play when a student points out something in the poem that the teacher has never noticed. This has happened to me hundreds of times, and it is always thrilling. (I even admit to hoping that it will happen, and sometimes to rigging my questions so that it *will* happen!) For example, I and a fourth grade class were discussing Williams's poem "The Last Words of My English Grandmother." In it, Williams (or a character very much like him) is trying to persuade his dying grandmother to go to the hospital; she doesn't want to go. When I asked the students why the old woman didn't want to go to the hospital, I was expecting them to say something like, "Because she knows that if she goes to the hospital, she'll die." (This is a very sophisticated response, actually; an adult response. Most children experience the hospital as an enforced separation from their loved ones. They do not go to hospitals to die, but to have their tonsils out.)

A boy raised his hand, and I called on him. "She doesn't want to go to the hospital," he said, "because in the hospital all the people wear these white robes, and she might wake up and think that angels were all around her." I was astounded at his insight. He had made an association between whiteness and heaven that I never would have located in a hospital ward. (Unwittingly, of course, he was speaking metaphorically: doctors and nurses in a hospital resemble the angels in heaven.) I later learned that the boy had recently been hospitalized himself, and his answer was based on his observations—with a crucial dash of poetic intuition thrown in. Later, when I discussed the boy's response with several teachers who had been observing the class, one told me that hospitals have actually done extensive psychological research in this area, and as a result the majority of hospital staffs may now be found clothed in green—the color of life and growth—rather than in white, the pallor of death, the color of the angels. And yes, the idea of death lurked behind what that boy said, but his poetic response gave the kind of luminous answer that teachers have to be ready for.

Virtuously humble and curious, the teacher can now afford to be practical by making sure that each and every student has a copy of the poem or poems to be discussed. As a poet myself, I beg you, please, *please* give the poem some breathing space when you reproduce it for class use. (Poems *look different* than prose on the page, and that is one of the reasons they are shaped the way they are, in *lines*.) Don't crush twelve poems onto one page; and for goodness sakes don't treat the poem as if it was a wilting violet or a new form of disease by fancying it up in Neo-unctial script. Type it up neatly, and credit the author.

Before we proceed to some ideas that will help you to talk about poems as if they were recordings of human experience and not terrifying Masterpieces of World Literature, let me lean on one important point. Students will frequently depart from the text of the poem and begin making up a lot of nonsense about "what the poem is saying." When they slip off the track (unless the new track is of particular interest), direct them back to the poem itself to see if what *they* are saying in any way corresponds to what the *poem* is saying. I find it necessary in the course of a discussion to do this again and again, no matter the grade level of the participants. The "answers" that may exist (if any) to the problems of the poem, the pith of "what the poem means," are either in the poem or we are guessing. Guesswork can be exciting, germane, and is in fact absolutely necessary. But our guesses (call them intuition, if you prefer) should always be balanced against the data contained in the poem. In entering any poem, we first want to find out what is going on. (Meaning ascribed to what is going on has a secondary function.) Experience is our objective; the interpretation of experience, a natural and laudable human activity, still comes afterwards.

NOTES

1. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume I, 1909-1939*. Edited by A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1986; paperback 1991), 372. Hereafter cited as *Williams CP, Volume I*. (return to text)
2. In fact, this is pretty much what happened. See the interview with Williams in *Voices and Visions: William Carlos Williams*. (New York: Mystic Fire Audio, 1988). (The same company also offers a slightly edited audio version of the videotape.) The printed text of the interview is available in *Interviews with William Carlos Williams: "Speaking Straight Ahead."* Edited with an introduction by Linda Welshimer Wagner (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1976).(return to text)
3. *Poems 1918-1975: The Complete Poems of Charles Reznikoff* (Santa Rosa, California: Black Sparrow Press, 1989). In the "Poems 1937-1975" section, 114-115.(return to text)

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