

Poetry Slam

Or, The decline of American verse

By [Mark Edmundson](#)

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Leafing through a volume of Robert Lowell's poetry not long ago, I came across some lines that I couldn't help reading over and over. They were from "Waking Early Sunday Morning" (1967), and they ran this way:

Pity the planet, all joy gone
from this sweet volcanic cone;
peace to our children when they fall
in small war on the heels of small
war — until the end of time
to police the earth, a ghost
orbiting forever lost
in our monotonous sublime.

I was taken by the artistry of the lines, by their subtlety and their melancholy grace. I was impressed by the rhymes: "ghost" and "lost," for instance, create exactly the right haunted and haunting sound. But it was Lowell's ambition that impressed me; he was looking at the world as though from outer space, like a graying weary seer, and pronouncing judgment. He was calling things as he believed them to be not only for himself but for all his readers. And he was looking into the future.

His prophecy about the filth-ridden state of the planet and the sad, endless “small wars” has turned out to be more or less true. But poets almost never do this sort of thing anymore, at least not prominent American poets. Our most highly regarded contemporary poets — the gang now in their fifties, sixties, and beyond, who get the major prizes and the plum teaching jobs and appear from time to time in the pages of *The New Yorker* — write in a much blander, more circumscribed mode. Granted that there’s no end of poetry being written and published out there: one can’t generalize about it all. Still, it’s palpably the case that the poets who now get the balance of public attention and esteem are casting unambitious spells.

Mainstream American poetry now often sounds like this:

For some time I thought there was time
and that there would always be time
for what I had a mind to do
and what I could imagine
going back to and finding it
as I had found it the first time
but by this time I do not know
what I thought when I thought back then

That’s W. S. Merwin from the December 12, 2011, issue of *The New Yorker*. At the close the poet hears a thrush at dawn “singing the new song.” A freshness in nature registers as an ironic reproach to the poet’s fruitless ruminations. “The New Song” is about the un-lived life: chances neglected, deeds undone. It also seems to be a poem about how hard it is to write a poem. (Going back to “what I had a mind to do” suggests not only deeds undone but poems unwritten.) The lines are melodious, the voice warm and sympathetic — but there’s too little at stake. We’re sitting in on a small-time game.

Most of our poets now speak a deeply internal language not unlike Merwin’s. They tend to be oblique, equivocal, painfully self-questioning. They not only talk to themselves in their poems; they frequently talk to themselves *about talking to themselves*, as Merwin does here. (“But by this time I do not know / what I thought when I thought back then.”) Lowell speaks directly of *our* children, *our* monotonous sublime: few are the consequential poets now who are willing to venture that “our” or,

more daring still, to pronounce the word “we” with anything like conviction. At a time when collective issues — communal issues, political issues — are pressing, our poets have become ever more private, idiosyncratic, and withdrawn. Their poetry is not heard but overheard, and sometimes is too hermetic even to overhear with anything like comprehension.

Contemporary American poets now seem to put all their energy into one task: the creation of a voice. They strive to sound like no one else. And that often means poets end up pushing what is most singular and idiosyncratic in themselves and in the language to the fore and ignoring what they have in common with others. The current poet may give a certain sort of pleasure by his uniqueness, but no one reading him will say what Emerson hoped to say when he encountered a poet who mattered: “This is my music; this is myself.”

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hat Emerson said of America’s poets in the 1840s is broadly true of them

now: “Our poets,” he writes, “are men of talents who sing, and not the children of music. The argument is secondary, the finish of the verses is primary.” Then Emerson makes a critical distinction. “It is not metres,” he says, “but a metre-making argument that makes a poem, — a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing.” Argument remains secondary (or tertiary) to our current poets, but it is not meter and finish that are primary — it’s voice. John Ashbery sounds emphatically like John Ashbery. “These lacustrine cities grew out of loathing / Into something forgetful, although angry with history.” In their coy flirting with sense, these lines could belong to no one else. Seamus Heaney (American, as it were, by mutual adoption) sounds only like Seamus Heaney:

I can feel the tug
of the halter at the nape
of her neck, the wind
on her naked front.
It blows her nipples
to amber beads,
it shakes the frail rigging

of her ribs.

The lines have an Anglo-Saxon earthiness, they're rugged and raw: his every word, a friend of mine once remarked, sounds like a verb. You could not listen to more than four lines of Ashbery or Heaney or Anne Carson or Jorie Graham (about whom more later) and not sense who was knocking at the door. But poetry is about more than voice.

Dante, it's been said, wrote his autobiography in grand cipher, until it became universal. Where are the poets now who have such hunger? When contemporary poets do write at length, with what appears to be large-scale designs, they tend to lapse into opacity and evasion: witness Paul Muldoon's "Madoc: A Mystery" and Graham's "Dream of the Unified Field," two poems by talented poets that, for this reader at least, fail to make repeated reading worthwhile. "Madoc" is about Wordsworth and Coleridge and their poetic collaboration: I have studied and taught these poets all my adult life and still have barely a clue as to what Muldoon is going on about. ("There were Geckoes armed with Zens / to either side.") The title at least is quite honest: "Madoc" is and remains a mystery.

Early in "Dream," Graham is going to return a leotard to someone. Snow begins to fall and the flakes (I presume) are

Gone as they hit the earth. But embellishing.
Flourishing. The road with me on it going on through. In-
scribed with the present. As if it really
were possible to exist, and exist, never to be pulled back
in, given and given never to be received. The music
of the footfalls doesn't stop, doesn't
mean. *Here are your things*, I said.

The lines, one suspects, are an attempt to evoke the sheer strangeness of being alive and abroad in the world. But to me (other readers may surely disagree), their vatic quality (they sound like the pronouncements of a latter-day oracle; they could be no one else but Graham) isn't at all matched by their power of revelation. The lines are portentous without touching on any fundamental truth of human experience. Who wouldn't like to write as if he or she held the key to the universe? But at a certain point the key must fit a groove and turn.

The most recently crowned monarch of imposing opacity is the Canadian poet Anne Carson, who is now grandly esteemed in the American poetry world. She is

impressively learned, a classicist, and devoted to her art, it is said, with a singular passion. But I cannot do much with the lines that begin “Stanzas, Sexes, Seductions” (or many of her other lines, either):

It’s good to be neuter.
I want to have meaningless legs.
There are things unbearable.
One can evade them a long time.
Then you die.

The poem is, I think, an attempt to imagine a posthuman identity. And surely it is distinctive in its *voice*. But it is so obscure, mannered, and private that one (this one, at least) cannot follow its windings. The title of a recent profile in the *New York Times*, “The Inscrutable Brilliance of Anne Carson,” has it half right.

What happens when poets at the height of ambition somehow feel the need to be programmatically obscure? The obvious result is that they shut out the common reader. But they also give critics far too much room to determine poetic meanings — and this may be why some critics so love Graham and Muldoon and Carson and Ashbery. Their poems are so underdetermined in their sense that the critic gets to collaborate on the verses, in effect becoming a co-creator. This is a boon to critics, but readers rightly look to poets to make sense of the world, even if it is a difficult sense — and not to pass half the job off to Ph.D.’s.

We might say that three qualities are necessary to write superb lyric poetry.

First, the writer must have something of a gift: she must be able to make music, command metaphors, compress sense, write melodiously when the situation demands and gratingly when need be. She must be versed in irony; she must have control of tone. But there is more — a second requirement. She must also have something to say. There must be some region of her experience that has transfixed her and that she feels compelled to put into words and illuminate. She must burn to attack some issue, must want to unbind a knot, tighten it, or maybe send a blade directly through its core.

Given these powers — the power of expression and the power to find a theme — the poet still must add ambition. She must be willing to write for her readers. She must be willing to articulate the possibility that what is true for her is true for all. When these three qualities — lyric gift; a serious theme, passionately addressed; real ambition

(which one might also call courage) — come together, the results can be luminous: one gets Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” or Plath’s “Daddy” or Lowell’s “Sunday Morning” (or Wallace Stevens’s). But without that last ingredient, ambition, nothing great will come. There are writers of real value who write with only two of the three capacities, though both may be heightened to an extraordinary degree. Adrienne Rich has no little to say and is not without ambition, but except in her love poems and some of the early lyrics, the gift for artful *expression* is not hers. In “Seven Skins” she devolves into flat storytelling:

Shall I drop you, he says, or shall
we go back to the room for a drink?
It’s the usual question
a man has to ask it
a woman has to answer
you don’t even think

Rich’s poetry is read by many who read few other poets: they are in search of eloquent, polemical prose, and she delivers it. James Merrill, a writer of stunning *poetic* gifts, finds a passionate theme only in a handful of magnificent lyrics, and in time ends up lost in the digressions that arise from consulting his Ouija board, the matrix for his late-1970s poem *The Changing Light at Sandover*. (“Zero hour. Waiting yet again / For someone to fix the furnace.”) There are plenty of poets writing now who have a strong lyric gift, who have searched for and found a theme. There are even some few who can be said to possess both theme and creative prowess. But the muse they invoke is not a fiery one.

What is a poem now? It is, to speak very generally, a moment of illumination.

One might call it — after the poet who is, however indirectly, behind much current work, Wordsworth — a spot of time. Suddenly, through luck or grace, application or inertia, the poet sees into the life of things — or more likely into the life of his own being. Yet this moment of illumination need not contribute to any coherent whole. American poets now usually do not seek to weave a comprehensive vision. No well-known poet seems inclined to think: Sex, politics, money, childhood — I need to get something down on all those or my vision of the world won’t be complete. Of course completeness, expanse — that was what one expected of Blake and Wordsworth and Whitman, and also of Auden and (allowing for the prose as part of his overall work) of Eliot. It came in Frost, Pound, Williams, Hart Crane, and (obliquely but

memorably) in Stevens. One expected it of Lowell and Ginsberg. Now the poem is a pinhole in the massing darkness, not part of a grand illumination in the making. Any modern poet who thinks of himself as creating a full-scale map of experience would be dismissed as hubristic and probably out of his mind. The poet writes the fragment that is given him to write; the idea of chronicling all experience, or all experience that matters, is entirely foreign. Poets now are music makers, not mythmakers. Their poems are like isolated droplets shimmering beautifully on a pane of glass. Sharon Olds bursts into the bathroom to see her father naked on the toilet seat (“Once”); Mary Oliver watches a hawk rise and fall (“Hawk”); Charles Simic dilates on the similarities between his table fork and a freakish bird of prey (“Fork”); Frank Bidart, inhabiting a mad girl’s mind, quivers at the sight of one lover at a restaurant feeding another (“Ellen West”); Robert Hass experiences an epiphany at the repeated sound of the word “blackberry” (“Meditation at Lagunitas”); Robert Pinsky compares the dead hum of his computer to the ghostly absence/presence of the Jews killed by Nazis at Vilna (sometimes the illuminations come, sometimes you force them, as in “The Haunted Ruin”). All these poems are good in their ways. They simply aren’t good enough. They don’t slake a reader’s thirst for meanings that pass beyond the experience of the individual poet and light up the world we hold in common.

Hass’s “Meditation at Lagunitas” is a particular case in point — not only because of what it does and does not deliver but because of the great esteem it has garnered since its publication in 1979. For certain poets writing now, “Meditation” is a sort of touchstone poem, an example of the way it ought to be done.

All the new thinking is about loss.
In this it resembles all the old thinking.
The idea, for example, that each particular erases
The luminous clarity of a general idea.

The poem moves into a meditation on the limits of philosophical reflection: when the poet and a friend discuss these matters, there appears in the friend’s voice “a thin wire of grief, a tone / almost querulous.” “Talking this way,” says the poet, “everything dissolves.” But from this state of stale abstraction there is deliverance. Writes Hass:

There was a woman
I made love to and I remember how, holding
Her small shoulders in my hands sometimes,
I felt a violent wonder at her presence
like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river
with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat,

muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish called *pumpkinseed*.

Through his memory the poet recovers the bright particulars of experience, the sparkling moments that get gobbled up by philosophical abstraction. “I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled bread, / the thing her father said that hurt her.”

The poem ends with a declaration of independence for the poetically specific: “Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings, / saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry*.”

The poem participates in a worthy battle, the battle that Plato said was already old in his time, the one between poetry and philosophy. But should such a modest engagement in the fight count as a major poem? Should a poem that rather mildly and unsurprisingly defends the right of the poet to say “blackberry” and not brood on essences be a big deal? How weak are poets now if they have to struggle for the right not to be Thinkers, and how beleaguered must they be if this capable but modest meditation becomes an anthem for them? I mean no severe criticism of Hass. He wrote an unpretentious and humane poem. It is only the situation of American poetry — timid, small, in retreat — that has made “Meditation at Lagunitas” matter so much.

I search in vain for the kind of large-minded poetic response the events that began on September 11, 2001, and continue to this moment ought to have engendered. To the “War Against America” and the “War on Terror” and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and Libya and Syria, I look for something like the creative reaction that Whitman had to the Civil War and Ginsberg had to Vietnam. In “Waking Early Sunday Morning,” Lowell, writing almost forty years before the fact, reacts to 9/11 and the wars that followed better than most of our contemporaries do. Why must this be so? Granted, it’s possible, even probable, that great aspirations will bring failure. A recent consequential and energetic political poem, “Somebody Blew Up America,” written and performed by Amiri Baraka, ends up in rant, some of it rather bizarre. (At a certain point Baraka appears to hold Israel directly responsible for the destruction of the towers.) But the poem is at least a strong attempt, an attempt to say not how it is for Baraka exclusively but how it is for all.

The critic Richard Poirier praised Norman Mailer for being willing to leap into the whirl of American signs and let his writing be a part of that mix, not a postcard from another world. Our poets have taken the opposite route, and it has made them inept when we most need them to be potent. When Lowell ends a famous poem of social

despair, “For the Union Dead,” with the words “a savage servility / slides by on grease,” he’s coming perilously close to ad-speak. He’s drunk on alliteration; it’s tantamount to sloganeering. But he’s also copping vitality from the popular world and dramatizing his own immersion in everyday America.

Contemporary American poetry speaks its own confined language, not ours. It is, by and large, pure. It does not generally traffic in the icons of pop culture; it doesn’t immerse itself in ad-speak, rock lyrics, or politicians’ posturing: it gravitates to the obscure, the recondite, the precious, the ancient, trying to get outside the mash of culture that surrounds it. The result is poetry that can be exquisite, but that has too few resources to use to take on consequential events.

Wordsworth is a central figure for modern American poets (whether they read him much or not), not only because our poets seek spots of time but also because Wordsworth was the great poet of purgation. He wanted to use “words / which speak of nothing more than what we are.” By which he meant, among other things, that he wanted to rid poetry of past accumulations; he wanted nothing to do with classical mythology and nothing to do with Christian myth. Jehovah and his choirs, Wordsworth says in the preface to *The Excursion*, “I pass them unalarmed.” There is plenty of space for poetry to expand, Wordsworth says, when it explores “the Mind of Man,” which he refers to as “My haunt, and the main region of my Song.” What Wordsworth did to pagan myth and Christian doctrine, many present-day poets have done to the current pressing equivalent: the demotic culture that capitalism throws up daily. The TV shows, the video games, the ads, the fashions, the Internet, movies, popular music: to read a good deal of contemporary poetry you would imagine these things never existed and don’t make up our collective environment. There are exceptions, of course. The poet Tony Hoagland certainly dwells in the present mix and mash. He calls a recent volume *Unincorporated Persons in the Late Honda Dynasty*. And Frederick Seidel is adept at reflecting on his own swelling desires in conjunction with the rapacious urges of our imperial republic.

Maybe America now is simply too much for its poets. Maybe they’re not up to grappling with it. Pondering them I think of the riff Bellow’s Charlie Citrine issues in *Humboldt’s Gift* about America and poetry. “The country is proud of its dead poets,” Citrine says:

It takes terrific satisfaction in the poets' testimony that the USA is too tough, too big, too much, too rugged, that American reality is overpowering. . . . Poets are loved, but loved because they just can't make it here. They exist to light up the enormity of the awful tangle and justify the cynicism of those *who* say, "If I were not such a corrupt, unfeeling bastard, creep, thief, and vulture, I couldn't get through this either. Look at these good and tender and *soft men*, the best of us. They succumbed, poor loonies."

Mass culture and mechanical reproduction surely play a part in the current retreat of American poetry, but what about MFA programs? Poetry now is something of a business. You make your way into the game by getting a sponsor: often it's a writer in residence from your undergraduate school. Then come the MFA and the first book, both of which usually require sponsorship — which is to say pull.

To thrive in this process you often must write in the mode of the mentor — you must play the game that is there to be played. You must be a member of the school, you must sing in the correct key. If you try to overwhelm the sponsor, explode his work into irrelevance — well, the first law of success is simple: Never outshine the master. The well-tempered courtier knows how to make those above him feel superior. He knows that in his desire to succeed he must not go too far in displaying what he can do. The master will not like it — and there will be no first book, no fellowship, no job, no preferment. It is only by making the master look more accomplished, by writing in his mode, becoming a disciple, that the novice ascends.

I found myself once talking with a fiction writer, a woman of considerable achievement and reputation, about the MFA program in which she taught. I put forward the idea that students came to the university to hide out, to show up for a few classes while the scholarship program financed them, however meagerly, and they pushed forward trying to write the Great American Novel. Not so. I had it wrong, my friend said. What the students wanted was not glory — not if glory meant high risk and the chance of failure. They were not there to be great. They were there to get a union card: most of them wanted a degree, a published volume, an assistant professorship at this college or that, and then another volume, which would put them one step away from the Grail.

I suspect too that some of poetry's reticence about speaking in large terms, swinging for the fence, owes to what one might call a theory-induced anxiety. In the modern-

day university, the literary theorists are down the hall from the poets. What cultural theory seems to have taught the younger generation of poets is that one must not leap over the bounds of one's own race and gender and class. Those differences are real and to be respected; the poets hear it time and again, if only as an echo from the nearby lecture hall: He who would write poetry that does not respect the politics of identity is impure, an opportunist, not to be trusted. Now, using Lowell's "our" or Whitman's "we" can register as a transgression against taste and morals. How dare a white female poet say "we" and so presume to speak for her black and brown contemporaries? How dare a white male poet speak for anyone but himself? And even then, given the crimes and misdemeanors his sort have visited, how can he raise his voice above a self-subverting whisper?

Poets now would quail before the injunction to justify God's ways to man, or even man's to God. No one would attempt an Essay on Humanity. No one would publicly say what Shelley did: that the reason he wrote his books was to change the world. But poets should wise up. They should see the limits emanating from the theoretical critics down the hall in the English department as what they are. Those strictures are not high-minded moral edicts but something a little closer to home. They are installments in the war of philosophy against poetry, the one Hass so delicately evokes. The theorists — the philosophers — want the high ground. They want their rational discourses to hold the cliffs, and they want to quiet the poets' more emotional, more inspired interjections. They love to talk about race and class and gender with ultimate authority, and of course they do not wish to share their right with others.

Most well-known American poets are or have been poet-professors, and this has its difficulties, too. It's a good thing that poets now have a reliable way to put bread (and, I hope, a little wine) on their tables. But teaching poetry means talking about it in a highly self-conscious way. It means bringing the judging faculty to the forefront. There have been major poets — Eliot stands out — who've been superb analytic critics. But poems, especially vivid, uncanny poems — ones that bring stunningly unlike things together in stunningly just and illuminating ways — don't come from anywhere close to the front of the brain, the place where (let us say) judgment sits. Poems, we've been told more than once, come from a dreamier, more associative place in the mind (and heart). One feels the judging faculty too much in many current American poems: Go this far and no farther.

To thrive in the world of contemporary poetry, to thrive at court, you had best play it safe, offend none. In this, what are probably the two most admired and

influential of contemporary poets excel beyond measure. The view that John Ashbery says little but that the little is most elegantly said will surprise no one. Ashbery is, with some exceptions, such as “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” what one might call a deconstructive poet. He unmakes sense. He leads one to the brink of meaning, hovers there, then backs away, calling attention to our (and maybe his) hunger for closure, for truth. (From “The Tennis Court Oath”: “I go on loving you like water, but” — yes, yes, *but* what? — “there is a terrible breath in the way of all this.”) He is an artful, teasing, dreamlike poet who no doubt often has the effect of edging other poets out of conventional ways of writing toward fresh constructions that live between the conscious will and the more fluid levels of the mind. The epigraph to Ashbery’s collected works should be a sentence written by the Sage of Concord: “An imaginative book,” Emerson says, “renders us much more service at first, by stimulating us through its tropes, than afterward, when we arrive at the precise sense of the author.” Though with Ashbery there ought to be this caveat: the author, in general, has no precise sense at all. He challenges the domination of the mind over the universe of experience. “These lacustrine cities grew out of loathing / Into something forgetful, although angry with history.” We’re on the verge of high-toned pronouncement. What about these lacustrine cities? But we move gracefully into parody of pompous academic discourse. Cities forgetful? Cities angry with history?

If this rather lovely poetry were considered a minor phenomenon, a soft muse to the efforts of others, it would be entirely apt. But Ashbery is one of the preeminent poets in the Anglo-American world. His work is published by the Library of America, and his evasions are the coin of the realm. Sylvia Plath may or may not overtop the bounds of taste and transgress the limits of metaphor when she compares her genteel professor father to a Nazi brute. (“Every woman adores a Fascist.”) But she challenges all women to reimagine the relations between fathers and daughters. The poet-prophet, says Northrop Frye, may do many things, but he never hedges. From the point of view of the reader who hopes occasionally for prophecy, Ashbery’s work is a perpetual hedging.

Ah, you might say, if you’re looking for conviction, risk, power, look to another monarch of the Anglo-American poetry world. Look at the true descendant of Yeats, the master: Seamus Heaney. Heaney is a potently gifted writer. He often *sounds* political and passionate. But mainly he grows strongest when he mourns what is past and passing. He loves to look back, and that seals him most effectively from the present. As does his frequent inscrutability — what poet has had so many recondite words in his work to keep the reader at bay, keep the reader believing that the poet must know something that he does not?

In “Punishment” (which I quoted earlier), a poem that begins with intensity of feeling and exquisite detail, Heaney describes what he believes to be a young girl whose body is exhumed from a peat bog in Windeby, Germany. The left side of her head had apparently been shaved clean. The Roman historian Tacitus, in his study of the German tribes, *Germania*, says that the tribes’ people often punished adulterous women by shaving their heads. Brilliantly, Heaney leaps forward in time to Northern Ireland, where Irish women who consorted with British troops were chained to a rail in public and similarly shaved. Heaney, addressing the exhumed body, thinks of his own place in this ritual of shame:

I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauled in tar,
wept by the railings

All right, then what happened? What do you make of this bitter moment?

who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge.

I think what the bard intends to say here is that he’s the sort of guy who would have shown these characters who shaved the Irish girls’ heads the cold shoulder when he passed them in the street. Then he’d “connive / in civilized outrage.” But at the same time, he fully understands the hunger to humiliate the women in the most graphic way possible. He understands “intimate revenge.” He wants it both ways — to be urbane and to be brutal, basic. Here and often elsewhere, Heaney can’t find a difference he won’t split.

Compare these lines with the close of “Easter, 1916,” by W. B. Yeats, a poet Heaney lionizes in his 1995 Nobel acceptance speech. At the start, Yeats has reservations about the Irish patriots who defied the British occupiers — he and his superior friends believe that they live amid jesters and clowns, live “where motley is worn.” But by the end of the poem, Yeats, great heart that he is, has pushed through his ambivalences, and motley, the fool’s colors, is replaced by another shade:

I write it out in verse —
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse

Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

The reader may concur in it, he may not. The reader may like it, he may not. The poet does not hedge.

One might compare Heaney with Allen Ginsberg, a poet who wildly immersed himself in the issues of his moment. Are his poems always poems? They are not, to be sure, always the best-crafted utterances, and here Heaney may be preferable. Ginsberg learned a great deal from the Buddhist tradition, though I wish he hadn't been quite so receptive the day his guru, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, told him that his first thought was inevitably his best thought. Yet his poems are brimming with wit, brio, tremendous energy, and a full heart. From "Howl" through "Plutonian Ode" to the marvelous chant of the skeletons, in which Ginsberg both flays his political enemies (the CIA) and reminds them and himself that we're all mortal, all suffering (all skeletons), and thus all in need of compassion — through all those days and through all those poems, Ginsberg never fails to deliver a vision of how it is for him *and* for us all. ("Said the Gnostic Skeleton / The Human Form's divine / Said the Moral Majority skeleton / No it's not it's mine.")

This vision Ginsberg splendidly compounds in his book of interviews, *Spontaneous Mind*, some of the best teachings on contemporary art and life to be found anywhere. You can embrace it all or toss it in the wastebasket, but there it is. Ginsberg can be wonderfully personal too: some of his later poems about love and loneliness (especially loneliness) are among his best. (In "Personals Ad" he tells us he seeks a courageous young male "warrior who may also like women & girls, no problem / to share bed meditation apartment Lower East Side, / help inspire mankind conquer world anger & guilt." Rueful, gently self-mocking, *old* — but still in the game.) Ginsberg epitomizes that being who now no longer seems to exist, the headlong public poet, who even when he writes about himself is trying to compose an allegory of the present for everyone — and who holds the gaze and esteem of the culture.

The willingness to say "we," to go plural and try to strike a major note, is not by necessity limited to leftist, populist poets such as Whitman and Ginsberg. T. S. Eliot called himself "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion." He said he was in favor of empires. Yet when he was persuaded that he was touching on the universal, as he surely did in "Little Gidding," he did not hesitate to

signify as much. That great lyric about patriotism and faith culminates with a profession:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

The poet speaks in the plural to evoke, among other things, how the true love of country can begin in a precise awareness of our point of origin, both physical and religious. Eliot shares nothing artistically or politically with Ginsberg and not much with Whitman, but he does share their daring — and that on some level is what matters most.

Both Ashbery and Heaney are gifted writers, developing their art, unfolding what is inside them. But what troubles me is the fact that their contemporaries have made them central poets of our time. It is they whom younger writers are to look up to, they who set the standard — and the standard is all for inwardness and evasion, hermeticism and self-regard: beautiful, accomplished, abstract poetry that refuses to be the poetry of *our* climate.

I often think that our poets now write as though history were over and they were living in a world outside collective time. They write as though the great public crises were over and the most pressing business we had were self-cultivation and the fending off of boredom. Many of our poets are capable of work that matters. There's a lot of talent in the room. But we need them to use it and to take some chances. We need their help. Against what's offered by the bankers and the ad men, the journalists and the professors, and the politicians (especially them), we need the poets to create our sense of the present and our hopes for the time to come. What Shelley said is so: True poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

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