

THREE BEGINNINGS AND THE MACHINE OF POETRY

HAD YOU TOLD ME WHEN I WAS YOUNG THAT I WAS GOING TO become a poet, I would have been bewildered. Not only did I not read or care about poetry, but I didn't even really imagine (or wonder) whether there was such a thing as a living poet at all. Poetry was something you did in school. It was old and boring. I never would have dreamed it would become central to my life.

In 1985, I was a senior in a big high school in Maryland. It was spring, English class, time of crushes, time of the dreaded poetry unit. The teacher handed around a list, and we had to pick one poet to write a research paper on. I chose W. H. Auden of the mysterious gender, probably because she or he for alphabetical reasons appeared at the top of the list.

From the library I procured a book and started reading the poems. There was no reason to think I was going to enjoy them. I was not a particularly artistic kid, and I didn't work on our high school literary magazine, or write. Nothing was auspicious. I do not remember opening the book. Yet to this day I still remember reading the first few lines of "Musée des Beaux Arts":

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just
walking dully along

and something just clicked. I can't say I felt I immediately understood everything, but the poem seemed to mean something I could not quite

put my finger on, something important to me.

This poem was talking about how real suffering is not dramatic, but takes place in ordinary life, “while someone else is eating or opening a window.” It’s actually not about suffering exactly, but about how people don’t *realize* that suffering is happening all the time, while they are doing their regular activities, “walking dully along.” I could definitely relate to this; it seemed right to me. I knew this was true, as many teenagers do.

I did not know who the Old Masters were. Obviously, they were old, and they were masters. So they were in control of things, or thought they were, and had been for a long time, it seemed. As the poem says, they were never wrong, at least not about suffering (so are they wrong now? or are they gone?).

Later I learned Auden was talking about great painters, in particular Bruegel. But when I first read the words “Old Masters,” something else came to mind, a more general idea that at one time there were people who knew and were in control, but not any longer. I think it had to do with the feeling of being a teenager, coming into adulthood: that scary and inevitable awakening into the truth about your parents and teachers, that they are not gods or masters at all.

The poem thinks about suffering in a general, distanced, even cold way. The ideas are interesting and sometimes a bit complex, but you don’t need anything but your attentive mind and a basic facility with English language to understand what is going on. It’s well written, and sounds good when you say it out loud, but there is nothing particularly fancy or “poetic” about the language: it doesn’t rhyme, nor is it obviously rhythmic in a way that is any different from good prose.

More than anything else, what I liked about the beginning of this poem, and still do, was something about *how* the poem was saying what it was saying. This effect starts right at the beginning of the poem, with the delay in the subject of the first sentence. The word (and therefore the idea of) “suffering” comes first, and we have to wait a little while to find out who this “they” is who “were never wrong.”

So when the Old Masters enter the poem, in the second line, it is grand and exciting, a little theatrical, especially after the line break. We have to wait an extra instant, and our eyes have to travel from the end

of the first line to the beginning of the second, to find out the rest of the sentence. Who are they? The sentence seems almost biblical, or at least old-fashioned, the way it is reversed. It makes me feel a certain way about what is being said, that it is serious, and has to do with truths that are not merely contemporary.

I liked other poems by Auden too, such as “A Lullaby,” which begins, “The din of work is subdued, / another day has westered / and mantling darkness arrived,” which seemed to me a pretty and sad way of describing the end of the day, the sunset, the darkness coming on. I knew that time of day from the long afternoons and early evenings in my family’s own house, after school, before dinner, waiting for my father to come home.

But most of all, “Musée des Beaux Arts.” I still love this poem. There’s a cruel humor there, which I’m only a little sorry to say must have appealed to the sixteen-year-old me: while people are suffering, “dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer’s horse / Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.” The poem describes a painting of the fall of Icarus. The end of the poem still gives me actual chills. The boy with his wax wings flies too close to the sun, despite the warnings of his father, and falls into the water, and no one really cares:

... and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

It is possible that I identified with that boy, who ignored his father’s warnings, and whose suffering seems of no real consequence to anyone. Or maybe I felt like the expensive delicate ship. Or both, or something else altogether, I really don’t remember. But for me, an anxious suburban kid afraid of disappointing everyone, the world got suddenly big and strange and full of contradictions that seemed true.

I liked this feeling, and I liked thinking the poem through for myself, without the help of any teachers or books. In fact, even though it was supposed to be a research paper, I wrote it all from my head, for which I was gently chastised. Don’t get me wrong, this wasn’t some kind of lasting revelation. I completely forgot about poetry for years. But I

think, just for a moment, I got the message that I could be in direct contact with poetry, without any kind of intermediary. It was a gift I accidentally received, because I was fortunate enough to encounter the right poem for me, at just the right time, when I was ready. Somewhere deep in myself I understood that there was something only poetry could do, a way only a poem could mean, and that I needed that feeling.

THINKING BACK NOW, I REMEMBER ANOTHER TIME, LONG BEFORE I read Auden, one I had completely forgotten, when I had a deep and private experience with poetry. It was 1972, and I was in first grade, in Washington, D.C. I went to Oyster Elementary, a small school just a few blocks away from our little row house. Oyster was bilingual, which meant that we took turns holding up pictures of things (duck, house, ocean) and solemnly saying both the English and the Spanish words.

In the morning when we entered our classroom, it was bright, and in the afternoon the sun was on the other side of the building, leaving our room dark and melancholy. On the windowsill were many books, among them a large one, Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*, with big ornate letters and colorful drawings. I loved to go to the window and read it. Often I would get up when the teacher was talking and just wander over there. This was uncharacteristic. I was an obedient eldest child, a little bit afraid all the time of making a mistake or doing the wrong thing.

Our classroom windows faced east, directly over Rock Creek Park, a mostly wild forested expanse that ran right through the middle of the city. I remember standing next to the window, holding the book, knowing the great park, with its massive stone bridges and trees and river, was very close, right there:

By the shores of Gitche Gumee,
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,
Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,
Daughter of the Moon, Nokomis.
Dark behind it rose the forest,
Rose the black and gloomy pine-trees,

Rose the firs with cones upon them;
Bright before it beat the water,
Beat the clear and sunny water,
Beat the shining Big-Sea-Water.

Now when I read this passage it makes me cringe, because of its offensive primitivism, its fantasy about how Indians thought and spoke. The poem also seems a bit silly in the way it says obvious things (like that the pine trees have cones, and so on). But I must confess I still do love how he calls the lake the Ojibwe knew as Gichigami, and we call Lake Superior, “Big-Sea-Water,” an example of how something very familiar can, when it is said in an unexpected way, become new for us again.

It still sounds solemn and good. Saying it out loud, I feel now as I did then the elemental force of the words. Forest, pine-trees, them, water, water, Water. There seems to be meaning in the sounds themselves. Robert Frost writes, “The best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words.” This makes me think of listening to my parents talking in another room, or downstairs. In those hums and murmurs there was so much information about mood, the emotional weather in the house, all to be gotten without hearing a single clear word.

As a child, standing at the window, knowing that right there just on the other side of the walls was the great park, the huge trees, and the river that had cut a deep canyon before the capital city had ever been imagined, the entire system of the poem acted on me, helping me feel an immense, sublime force, something true about the old land that had been here long before us.

For better and worse, with all its tragic, complex, at times misguided and at others deeply intuitive sense of mystery, *The Song of Hiawatha* was my first poem. Many of you must have your own. Let us go then, you and I, where evening spreads itself against the sky. Two roads diverged in a yellow wood. Much have I traveled in the realms of gold. Here is the deepest secret nobody knows. I placed a jar in Tennessee. When I get to be a composer, I’m going to write me some music. My life it stood, a loaded gun. Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze. I

celebrate myself, and sing myself. won't you celebrate with me what i have shaped into a kind of life?

THROUGH MY EARLY TWENTIES, I STILL NEVER WOULD HAVE thought to call myself a poet. In college, I majored in Russian language and literature. Right after graduating, I lived for a year on a fellowship in the Soviet Union, "studying" at Moscow State University, which mostly involved drinking vodka at any time of day, eating possibly radioactive meat, and compiling a highly detailed glossary, now lost, of Russian curse words.

When I came back, I moved to San Francisco, in its beautiful early 1990s inexpensive run-down bohemian doldrums. Tragic love, alcohol, soft drugs, temp jobs, more confusion. My hair was long and various colors. I thought to myself that someday I would write songs. I wrote a few; they were not so good. Without a clear idea of how to move forward, I went to graduate school, at UC Berkeley, for Russian literature.

Berkeley in the 1990s was full of brilliant, attractive young people, and I remember when I first got there just walking around admiring everyone. I had gone to a small college in a rural town in the Northeast, so I found Berkeley's urban campus to be romantic in an exciting, bustling, modern way. I was instantly thrilled to be there, but I also almost immediately realized something undeniable: I did not belong, at least not as a scholar. Basically, I was less prepared, less interested, and less motivated than my brilliant, focused classmates. It was obvious to me the first day I sat for hours in the library, laboriously and poorly translating some highly academic text from Russian to English, that my studies were not destined for success. Many years of unpleasant mediocrity in scholarship loomed.

So there, in Berkeley, in the little room I rented, I started to sit down every day for a few hours to write, without really knowing what I was working on, what I was going to find. It is amazing to me now that I knew to do that. Probably it was just an elemental decision, the only thing left to do besides give up writing before I had even begun. And as foolish and careless as I might have been about everything else in those days, for whatever reason I simply could not *not* try to write.

To my great surprise, what I started writing was poetry. I was already deeply attracted to words, in an unreasoned, almost shameful way. I loved them for their own sakes, for the various things they could do, and for the meanings that could be made when I put them alongside ones they weren't ordinarily next to, or far from ones they are usually near. This pleasure I took in language itself overrode any interest I had in telling stories, or organizing my ideas in a systematic way.

I had always loved language. I was intrigued by the meanings of words, the structure of syntax. Even though along with everyone else I complained, in elementary school I secretly liked diagramming sentences. I liked learning Latin in high school, and memorizing the byzantine verb tenses of French.

What I did not yet understand was that this is where the practice of poetry begins. The desire to write anything begins out of a basic human desire to express oneself, to be heard. Writing poetry in particular also comes out of an inexplicable attraction to the possibilities of the material of language itself, a kind of play.

Yet I was also interested in doing more than just playing around. I wanted to take words and build them into larger structures that would *do something*, something exciting, powerful, even useful. I didn't know how to do this. But I did know the feeling I got when I searched out, and found, poems that I loved. It was like plugging something into a socket, and electrifying my imagination, making me feel I was more aware, empathetic, thoughtful, engaged, alive.

WHEN I WAS FIRST STARTING TO WRITE POETRY, I STILL DIDN'T really understand much about it. I hadn't been an English major in college, nor had I read much American poetry. So I felt simultaneously thrilled, destabilized, and confused. I felt sure there was meaning there, somewhere. I could feel it. But I also often doubted myself, and felt like I was looking in the wrong place, or missing what was really important.

At that time, I had the vague impression that poets used poetic language and techniques to express important thoughts or ideas in a more beautiful or complex or compressed way than prose. That is, there was something about the level of language, its beauty or

complexity or heightened qualities, that gave a piece of writing the status of poetry, and distinguished it from prose.

The more poetry I read, and wrote, the more clearly I saw that there really was no such thing as “poetic language.” The words in poems are for the most part the same as those we find everywhere else. The energy of poetry comes primarily from the reanimation and reactivation of the language that we recognize and know.

Poetry isn’t merely a more beautiful way to communicate ideas or experiences or feelings: prose, after all, does that, and can be just as beautiful as poetry too. I noticed there were, of course, ideas in poetry, but they always seemed just out of reach, somehow both important and also in a way not, or at least not *most* important. Focusing just on those ideas, and trying to say what a poem was “really” about, always felt reductive, as if whatever was most important was being left behind in the act of explanation itself. Poetry seemed to be more about something else, something like creating a different sort of mood, or mental space, or way of thinking.

Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote, “Do not forget that a poem, although it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information.” If not to give information, what is the language of poetry for? What does it do that is different than prose? And why, as readers and writers, do we return to it, and preserve it?

The concept of genre—a defined category of writing, like poetry or novels or plays—isn’t currently fashionable. Many people find such categories too restrictive and fussy. Much of the energy of contemporary literature is in crossing and mixing various genres in single pieces of writing. Yet when it comes to poetry, it can help to think about genre in a more isolated way, at least temporarily, because the question of genre is really a question of purpose: Why did the writer choose a certain type of writing, and how does that choice affect how we should read the work before us?

We don’t usually need to think about *why* we are reading something. Usually, we have an immediate, intuitive sense of what it is for, and therefore how to read it. Without needing to be told, we understand the difference between reading a novel and reading the newspaper. We know we should be looking for something different in

each of those experiences. Stories and novels create characters and situations and tell stories; journalism communicates information; essays engage in that hard-to-categorize effort to explore, however loosely, a certain idea; editorials and sermons tell us what we should and should not do, and believe; and so on.

No one can seem to tell us why poems are written, what they are for. Why are they so confusing? What are we supposed to be looking for? And what is the point of rhyme, of form, of metaphor, of imagery? Is it somehow to decorate or make more appealing some kind of message of the poem? What is the purpose of poetry?

When I am asked such questions, I think of what Paul Valéry (1871–1945) wrote in “Poetry and Abstract Thought”: “A poem is really a kind of machine for producing the poetic state of mind by means of words.” Valéry’s description has always seemed to me to be as close as anyone has gotten to describing what poems can do:

If the term machine shocks you, if my mechanical comparison seems crude, please notice that while the composition of even a very short poem may absorb years, the action of the poem on the reader will take only a few minutes. In a few minutes the reader will receive his shock from discoveries, connections, glimmers of expression that have been accumulated during months of research, waiting, patience, and impatience.

The poem makes poetry happen in the mind of the reader or listener. It happens first to the poet, and in the course of writing, the poet eventually makes something, a little machine, one that for the reader produces discoveries, connections, glimmers of expression. Whatever it does it can do again and again, as many times as we need it.

The “poetic state of mind” that poetry makes happen could be described as something close to dreaming while awake, a higher, more aware, more open, more sensitive condition of consciousness. The poem makes this happen for us by placing our mind as we read or listen in consonance with the associations being made by the poem: its “discoveries, connections, glimmers of expression.”

In a letter, Emily Dickinson wrote, “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?”

I like this answer too because, like Valéry’s definition, it distinguishes poetry from other forms of writing not by any particular formal quality—like rhyme, or line breaks, or musicality, or the use of imagery or metaphor—but by its *effect*. Her definition is functional and empirical, passionate and subjective: I know poetry, say Dickinson and Valéry, because of how it makes me feel, what it does to me.

HOW POETRY CREATES THE POETIC STATE OF MIND IN A READER is the central question of this book. It happens through the form of the poem, which guides the mind of a reader. It happens through leaps of association. And it happens as the poem explores and activates and plays with the nature of language itself.

Poems exist to create a space for the possibilities of language as material. That is what distinguishes them from all other forms of writing. Poems allow language its inherent provisionality, uncertainty, and slippages. They also give space for its physicality—the way it sounds, looks, feels in the mouth—to itself make meaning. And poems also remind us of something we almost always take for granted: the miraculous, tenuous ability of language to connect us to each other and the world around us. The elusive, quicksilver, provisional nature of language is by necessity suppressed in ordinary conversation, as well as in most other writing. What makes a poem different from any other use of language is that it remains the sole place designed *expressly* to make available those connections that are hidden when language is being used for another purpose.

Language waits to be released in poetry. Poetry enacts the possibilities and powers that lie dormant in the nature of language itself. Poems are where contradictions and possibilities of the material of this meaning-making system are *deliberately* brought forth and celebrated, ultimately undistracted by any other overriding purpose.

Unlike other forms of writing, poetry takes as its primary task to insist and depend upon and celebrate the troubled relation of the word

to what it represents. In following what is beautiful and uncertain in language, we get to a truth that is beyond our ability to articulate when we are attempting to “use” language to convey our ideas or stories.

Poetry takes this inherent limitation of the material of language—that words are imprecise in their relation to whatever it is they all-too-imperfectly denote—and turns it into a place of communion. Remarkably, impossibly, miraculously, we somehow manage to communicate and mean despite the imperfect instrument of language. In this way, the provisional, tenuous, exciting, fragile, imperfect, yet intensely pleasurable relationship of a poem to language, and to meaning, could be said to be a kind of metaphor for our own relation to language, the world, and each other. There can be both sadness and joy in this recognition of the human condition. It could be said the relationship of poems to what we intuit but can never fully say makes them like prayer, that unending effort to bring someone closer to the divine, without pretending the divine could ever be fully known or understood.

When we are attentive to the language of poetry, to the words we see before us in the poem, we start to get a glimmer of the actuality, the paradox and complexity and uncertainty, that lies behind the way we usually perceive the world. Words and ideas can loosen and break free for a moment, so we can experience them anew.

The power of the activated material of language in poetry can only fully be pursued when the writer is not *ultimately* preoccupied with any other task, like storytelling or explaining or convincing or describing or anything else. In their poems, poets do those things, but only as long as it suits them. A poet is always ready to let them go. Every true poem is marked, somewhere, by that freedom. And that choice to be ready to reject all other purposes, in favor of the possibilities of language freed from utility, is when the writer becomes a poet.