

Daniel Tobin

from *This Broken Symmetry*

(Simone Weil, 1943-1909)

(Rio Ebro)

After turning away from the rearguard of Paris, the safe
House of her pacifism, with her parents following, afraid
She will do something silly, after descending with the militia

Through Lerida into Aragon to the banks of the Ebro
To take up her rifle there, her comrades at target practice
Fleeing anywhere near her line of fire (*Lord deliver us*

From mousey women); after crossing to the other side
Where Phalangists wait in this war without prisoners
“For if one is captured, one is dead,” she hugs ground

Only to look up, stretched out on her back as the spitfire
Flies past on reconnaissance, thinking she will be caught,
And sees nothing other than the increase of blue sky,

This “infinity of perfect beauties, of all things that were
Or will be,” and looks for an instant “beyond the veil
To the real presence,” objectless, adoring the distance

(Though “all the horrors of this world are like the folds
Imposed on waves by gravity”) between God and God,
Until the stooping man one thinks one sees on the road

At dusk reveals a tree, and the voices heard just leaves
Rustling on *Los Picos des Tres Maras* where the river begins —
Before the bivouacs resume and she burns herself with oil,

Before her comrades who will fight and die carry her out,
Before her parents who did not expect to see her again
See her again, arrived safely, smiling, radiant: “Here I am.”

Brand

Brightly vested in their loose smocks, the ebullient troop sways rhythmically onto the floor, their gold drums strapped before them around their waists. The drummer's arms move in unison, felt mallets the size of tennis balls pound confidently, the great percussive rush amplifies to fill the arena with aplomb and applause. *Grooversity* is in the building. Now the troop splits in two to navigate the aisles separating hundreds of empty chairs where, just weeks earlier, the hockey rink would await its intrepid skaters. They align themselves in front of the raised dais with its microphones and teleprompters as the leader raises his arms to the cheering crowd of thousands. Along the digital rim below the rafters the College's name flashes and glows, white letters, a bright purple band. Four massive screens will simulcast the ceremony; will broadcast pre-recorded encouragement from a pithy alum array happy to urge the graduates onward to success, to developing and advancing their personal brands. Though if one closed one's eyes, all this could be the hoopla of some ancient ritual, the opening celebration of games held between city states, or, today, a long-promoted boxing match — Las Vegas, its neon dazzle and panache. From a channel under the stands the faculty process, all mortarboards and tams and medieval gowns, the occasional bare head — some grooving awkwardly to the drums, some in time, most marching dutifully — but for the one in the black baseball cap, no team insignia, taking in the scene. Let's call that one the heretic poet. There, with the platform party, is another poet, the commencement speaker, engaging, funny, self-deprecating, greatly popular. He will have the graduates and their families laughing and clapping, even the faculty nodding in appreciation for the light touch with its hint of profundity, the nods to the masters. One suspects even the student graduating with the self-designed major, "Performance Poetry Transforming the World," will find his remarks entertaining.

The scene I have sketched portrays accurately the commencement exercises held at a notable American college dedicated in its niche fashion to the study of communications and the arts, and means to highlight for the moment a broader perspective on the situation of poetry now relative to the roadless road of postmodernist practice. Perhaps like the split rows of chairs demarking separate areas within the student population it means to suggest pathways or an arrangement of crossroads (if not bridges) be-

tween and among approaches, sensibilities, disciplines. On the other hand, it might be best not to overwork the conceit. Let's say there are two principal figures here, ignoring for the time being our heretic poet with his incongruous hat amidst the sea of floating tams and mortarboards. Let's say the principal figure for the moment is our affably and ruefully articulate commencement speaker, and let's say that speaker is Billy Collins — "Literary Lion," winner of many noteworthy awards, former poet laureate of the United States and bestselling author of numerous poetry collections. Usually one might consider the phrase "popular poet" an oxymoron, but not in the case of Billy Collins. What Charles Bernstein ironically evokes in his poem "Thank You for Saying Thank You," Billy Collins embodies genuinely, for Collins really is 'committed / to poetry as a / popular form, like kite / flying and fly fishing." At the antipodes to postmodernist practice resides the work of popular poetry, the kind of poetry that looks at the world with a wry attentiveness and easefully literate intelligence, inviting the audience to sail with the poet around the room, to paraphrase the title of Collins' selected poems. Collins has become that most unlikely of oxymorons — a bestselling poet. He is effectively, by poetry standards, his own brand.

In the case of "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes," one of his many widely known poems, Billy Collins' offers an affectionate take on one of the language's most formidably brilliant poets whose brand — if one can call her unlikely canonicity a brand — appeals perhaps to a somewhat different readership. Here is the opening:

First, her tippet made of tulle,
easily lifted off her shoulders and laid
on the back of a wooden chair.

And her bonnet,
the bow undone with a light forward pull

One can see more or less immediately where the poem is going and how the poet means to bring us there. If we attune ourselves to the clever first line, we know the poem invites us into its fantasy of unclothing the Maid of Amherst through a series of allusions to her own poems and the Spartan circumstances of her life, riffs lightly touched and re-touched as Collins' lines advance easefully down the page. The goal is not to disrupt or jar — certainly

not to shock with the sophomoric glee of Matthew Dickman's "Emily Dickinson to the Rescue." Nor is it to be "wallpaper." Nor, however, does it seek to challenge the reader the way Dickinson inevitably does by encountering the nakedness of being at its psychic core through metaphorical richness and conscious probity of her hymn-like stanzas. The goal is to orchestrate a narrative of pleasantly surprising incongruity so entertainingly that the reader hardly realizes the poet is deftly demythologizing his formidable subject and simultaneously seducing the reader to join him in his affectionate voyeurism. The poem is fancifully engaging, and many a reader would be bound to fancy it.

Not to be outdone, Collins has his own flair for metaphor and simile — his hands part the fabric of Dickinson's white dress "like a swimmer's dividing water," until in the poem's fourth stanza the dress puddles at her feet and he finally sails "toward the iceberg of her nakedness." There are effortless tonal modulations as well: "The complexity of women's undergarments / in nineteenth century America / is not to be waved off . . ." Thus, the poet proceeds "like a polar explorer" through the clips and clasps and moorings and whalebone stays, until the poem turns "postmodernly" self-reflexive:

Later, I wrote in a notebook
it was like riding a swan into the night,
but, of course, I cannot tell you everything . . .

What the poet does tells us is a series of further riffs on Dickinson's own poems, "how there were sudden dashes whenever we spoke," allusions to Death's carriage that stopped for her, the fly buzzing at the windowpane, the plank in reason that breaks before she drops down and down, hitting a world at every plunge before she finishes knowing.

From the vantage of inventive conception, witty playfulness, and an engagingly accessible tone, "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes" sails appealing through the wry turns of its witty tryst, whether kite-like in Bernstein's ironic formula or merely around the rooms of its stanzas. Even the un-Dickensian allusion to Yeats' "Leda and the Swan" — "like riding a swan into the night" — offers a sly inversion of the Irish poet's mythological critique. From another vantage, the poem could be seen as something artfully akin to mellow jazz. The poem puts one at ease, but does it nudge the reader by indirection or subliminally into Dickinson's

own spiritual urgency, the spiritual nakedness at the core of her poems? One must say no. To push a bit harder, what does it do to our appreciation of Emily Dickinson to portray her as a sexually frigid spinster? One does not need to read very deeply into the vast Dickinson oeuvre to feel the spiritual passion that lets itself loose physically with a vital urgency — “Wild Nights, Wild Nights” — as well as the most passionate sadness. Such poems are as far from frigid as anything could be: “I cannot live with you / It would be Life / And Life is over there / Upon the Shelf” In contrast, this fancifully frigid Emily Dickinson is something other than the demythologized figure of immense genius. For all his wit and ingenuity, the poem feels something closer to pastel portrait, the popularly branded idea of Emily Dickinson, and not the extraordinary mind and heart we discover in the poems.

Another kind of contemporary popular poem, related in formal ease to “Taking Off Emily Dickinson’s Clothes,” offers less by way of wit and ingenuity and more by way of plangent affirmations. At the upper echelon of this brand of populist poetry one finds the work of Mary Oliver. Oliver won the Pulitzer Prize for *American Primitive* some thirty-five years ago, which was the height of her accomplishment in the art. Like Billy Collins, she is one of the most popular of American poets and as such a staple on Poetry in Motion, that most concerted, celebrated, and civic-minded effort to bring poetry to the widest possible audience. Mary Oliver, within the limited frame of late capitalist American poetry, has become a brand. Among people who find themselves drawn to “accessible poetry,” her work has the quality called “being relatable.” By way of example, Oliver’s “An Old Story” appeared recently on the Boston T. It begins with the convergence of sleep and spring along with the poet waking “in the valley of midnight” to a quietly momentous revelation:

My heart says, what you thought you had you do not have.
My body says, will this pounding ever stop?

My heart says, there, there, be a good student.
My body says, let me up and out, I want to fondle
Those soft white flowers, open in the night.

Oliver’s poem aims to appeal to some common, one might say generic emotional core, and it does so by trading on stock figures — “valley of midnight” — and the consolations of an

easy transcendentalism. This nighttime dialogue of heart and body has little of the necessary urgency of a dialogue of self and soul, of the kind Yeats demanded of himself and his readership, or Oliver's own best early work. The poem "fondles" the reader with a soft universalism, a silken blurrily focused univocal portrait the poet presumes we all must share. It is after all an Old Story, rendered now without any drama of consciousness. We are not all that terribly far from Rupi Kaur, the most popular of contemporary poets, a veritable Instagram phenomenon. Here is one of her faux Rumi verities:

he isn't coming back
whispered my head
he has to
sobbed my heart

To paraphrase Dorothy upon her arrival in Oz, I think we're not in poetry anymore; though to say as much is to be considered elitist or condescending in the current milieu. Others have parlayed celebrity into the moniker of poet — Art Garfunkle, Suzanne Somers, Richard Thomas, Leonard Nimoy — but other than Rod McKuen it is hard to recollect a "poet" parlaying their "art" into celebrity of this magnitude. Her brand extends to millions. Such is the leveling effect of the postmodern in its popular form — and the shrewdness of this "artist" to ride with aesthetic abandon the flood-tide of social media. Against such effluvia there are the likes, again, of Yeats, and Yeats' riveting dialogue between Self and Soul, of which Self has the final say:

I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought;
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!
When such as I cast out remorse
So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything
Everything we look upon is blest.

With his characteristic lighter touch, Billy Collins' work can approach this level of urgency, as at the beginning of his poem "The Afterlife": "While you are preparing for sleep, brushing your teeth, / or riffling through a magazine in bed, / the dead of the

day are setting out on their journey.” The remainder of the poem marvelously introduces the reader to the life of the dead and their final longing to return to the living, and ends with a brilliant image for poetry itself — “the winter trees, / every branch traced with the ghost writing of snow.” Likewise, Mary Oliver’s work at its best as in “Hawk” captures nature and the mind’s encounter with an indelible vitality, as when the hawk rising out the meadow settles “on the small black dome / of a dead pine / alert as an admiral / its profile / distinguished with sideburns / the color of smoke” and it compels the poet to an overwhelming recognition: “remember / this is not something / of the red fire, this is / heaven’s fistful / of death and destruction.” Neither of these poems, “The Afterlife” and “Hawk,” gravitates to aesthetic populism for all their accessibility, though each achieves in its own idiom the gravitas of genuine poetry.

Once, riding the Dublin Area Rapid Transit train — the DART — from City Center to Howth to visit Boscadden Cottage where Yeats lived for a time as a young poet I caught sight of the indelible lines of “Sailing to Byzantium” next to an ad for Tayto Crisps. Seamus Heaney’s sonnet about peeling potatoes with his mother was recently voted Ireland’s favorite poem. Whatever goes by the name of “popular poetry” appears always to be a local phenomenon. On the other hand, the spoken word poet Holly McNish has surged in popularity across the United Kingdom and all of Europe. Such news would certainly hearten one of the other figures in the Commencement arena, our graduating student with the self-designed major animated by genuine commitment and idealism. Can performance poetry save the world, as they believe, or was Auden right when he said poetry makes nothing happen? Then again, is performance poetry an entirely new phenomenon in the age of social media and the Internet? As one of my best students one told me in passing, “All of the poets I most respect have twitter accounts.” Many poets do, now, have twitter accounts, though it is hopefully if not probably true that the brand of a twitter handle will not bring one’s work to posterity, but the achievement of the work itself.

One of the real powers of performance and spoken word poetry as a type of popular poetry lies in community building — something sorely needed if Yuval Noah Harari is right, and “the local intimate community” for which we are evolutionarily wired has collapsed since the onward march of our technologically advancing postmodernity.¹ From another vantage, performance

poetry turns the art of poetry back to its roots in ritual, or in theatre, or the mead hall. A poet such as Patricia Smith, to choose the most obvious example, means that performance for the stage need not preclude performance on the page. Yeats himself advanced in his art by writing for the stage, by grounding his fluent lyricism in dramatic speech.

Concurrent with performance poetry, what has come to be called in some circles “identity poetry” — the kind of poetry that foregrounds identification with a social or cultural group as a defining characteristic of the subject matter — has not only gained in popularity but has gained, also, an academic foothold. There are many very fine contemporary poets who might well be named — many fine young poets who inspire the likes of our idealistic graduate — and who communicate considerable political urgency. They form, perhaps, a different avant garde than Hoover’s rather academically entrenched postmodernists, as though their own brand were somehow suddenly fading from the limelight despite protestations to the contrary.

Yet, so called “identity poetry” also is not new. In aligning his work with the Irish Literary Renaissance and in fueling that Renaissance as vanguard, Yeats’ poems pushed the matter of Irish identity on a recalcitrant British Empire to substantial political effect. Similarly, a poem like Adrienne Rich’s “Diving into the Wreck” continues to be an aesthetic and political landmark in the advancement of women’s and LGBTQ voices, and a measure for all serious practitioners of the art. Perhaps for our own socially urgent moment the great example is Gwendolyn Brooks. Her mastery of the masters in every sense, aesthetically and politically, manifests itself everywhere in her work. When she explores the virulently flawed mentality of racism and racial violence in such poems as “The Lovers of the Poor” and “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi, Meanwhile, a Mississippi Burns Bacon,” she exposes the mind-set of that virulence with consummate artistry. When at the it is end of “The Boy Died in my Alley” she writes “The red floor of my alley / is a special speech to me” she at once gives voice to the voiceless and calls out those authorities who remain blind to, if not complicit with the system. Her importance, as Elizabeth Alexander affirms, is incontestable. She has been “one of the most influential poets of the twentieth century” even as “her poems distill the very best aspects of the Modernist style with the sounds and shapes of various African-American forms and idioms.”ⁱⁱ Her sustaining influence and mastery is perhaps

best exemplified in “The Sermon on the Warpland.” With extraordinary prescience, her *ars poetica* affirms the ultimate significance of her identity and the identity of her people:

Build now your Church, my brothers, sisters. Build
never with brick nor Corten not with granite.
Build with lithe love. With love like lion eyes.
With love like morningrise.
With love like black, our black —
luminously indiscreet;
complete; continuous.

Devoted to her community, and to a vision of love that must inevitably transcend the limits of social, historical, and cultural boundaries, Gwendolyn Brooks’ work is beyond branding. As her work emerged into its late maturity she chose, in fact, the smaller community press rather than the “major” press that published her early Pulitzer Prize-winning work. In our era of poetry branding that would be a counterintuitive decision. From the standpoint of canon, evidenced in the entire body of her work, the legacy of Gwendolyn Brooks’ poetry is that she refuses to collapse standards into the obliquities of taste, to invoke Agha Shaid Ali’s important distinction.ⁱⁱⁱ Rather, she expands the standards of tradition and canon without lessening them, without relegating the poet’s art to the very real and at times perceived *tout corps* oppressions of a static, monolithic tradition. She was well-aware early on, as Elizabeth Alexander again reflects, of the “pressure” for black writers “to prove their literacy . . . through the mastery of European forms.”^{iv} The well documented change heralded in her late poetry was a turning toward and an embrace of her community, though it is not a repudiation of the mainline European tradition. Rather, it signals an enlargement and revitalization not only of the canon but of the traditions of poetry in English that continues today in the work of a wide variety of voices from many cultural, ethnic, and gendered vantage grounds.

At the same time, to again heed Agha Shahid Ali’s observation, not all “identity” poems are necessarily good poems, and there are standards that mark true greatness. Here, by way of a contemporary counter example, is the opening of “The Death of Robert Lowell”:

O, I don't give a shit.
He was an old white-haired man
Insensate beyond belief and
Filled with much anxiety about his imagined
Pain. Not that I know.
I hate fucking wasps.

From here Eileen Myles goes on to lampoon “the old white-haired loon’s” time at McLean Hospital, dismissing a poet who has written demonstrably great poems and who, like Ray Charles and James Taylor the poet reminds us, “once rested there.” “The famous, as we know, are nuts.” More curse poem than elegy, Myles’ “The Death of Robert Lowell” has nothing to say about making with “lithe love.” It has everything to say, however inadvertently, about how blind ideology undermines the art that a poet presumes to practice with the utmost seriousness and ambition: “Take Robert Lowell. / The old white haired coot. / Fucking dead.”

It might be argued that I have gravitated with this example to the lowest uncommon denominator, though Eileen Myles’ work has assumed considerable branding over the last few years and is not at a loss for critical attention and ample consideration for awards. Branding can be power, of a certain kind, and that includes the power to demean, condemn, and trivialize. Perhaps “The Death of Robert Lowell” might best be called an “anti-identity” poem fueled by an anti-poetic animus—to unmake rather than make, to place another’s unmaking at the forefront of one’s own writerly ambitions. It does not seem to be the most constructive motivation or the most exemplary of accomplishments. In any case, Myles’ poem is also about branding, in this case the branding of Robert Lowell—old coot, loon, wasp, famous poet of undeniable social and historical privilege—for post-mortem trivialization, execution, erasure: fucking dead. The poet who wrote “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket” and more than a few other poems worthy of the utmost admiration, deserves better, regardless of how one might feel personally about his privilege, family history, social status, and personal failures.

The problem with what goes by the shorthand “identity poetry” is that those who employ the phrase whether critically or descriptively often lose sight of the fact that subject matter does not become content until it has been brought under the shaping jurisdiction of form. Form, in this sense, maybe realized “formal-

ly openly or brokenly” and does not involve any “mechanical fidelity to inherited rules.”^v From this perspective, Myles’ “The Death of Robert Lowell” lacks more than good taste; it lacks the artistic realization even of its passionate, political urgency. When I encounter this kind of flippant contempt for genuine artistry in the face of some personal or social animus, I find myself resisting the phrase “identity poetry.” From one perspective, it appears to empower — I have heard students and other poets use the phrase or some variation appreciatively — while from another it instantiates anew the very marginalization it claims to redress. In masterful hands, however, a poem achieves the kind of intendedness and complexity that places the reader or listener genuinely in the nexus of intractable emotions, ideas, cultural and personal inheritances. Such is Natasha Trethewey’s “Pastoral”:

In the dream, I am with the Fugitive
Poets. We’re gathered for a photograph.
Behind us, the skyline of Atlanta
hidden by the photographer’s backdrop —
a lush pasture, green full of soft-eyed cows
lowing, a chant that sounds like *no, no*. Yes
I say to the glass of bourbon I’m offered.
We’re lining up now — Robert Penn Warren,
his voice just audible above the drone
of bulldozers, telling us where to stand.
Say “*race*,” the photographer croons. I’m in
blackface again when the flash freezes us.
My father’s white, I tell them, and *rural*.
You don’t hate the south? They ask. *You don’t hate it?*

Trethewey’s blank sonnet, her use of the form as much a nod to Robert Lowell as to the Fugitives at once evokes and interrogates, and refuses to stoop to vitriolic condemnation and lampoon. The ironic “pastoral” of her title at once conjures the complexity and injustices of that tradition — European and the American south — and contests that tradition. If Yeats is right in saying that out of the quarrel with others one makes rhetoric and out of the quarrel with self, poetry, then Eileen Myles’ “The Death of Robert Lowell” is nothing more than an empty rhetorical contrivance. By contrast, Trethewey’s “Pastoral” is a brilliantly achieved manifestation of the argument with self that has broad positive repercussions aesthetically, socially, and politically. The wonderful sleight

of that “no, no Yes” at the end of line four embodies all of the dynamics of the poem’s raw contraries. Just outside the poem, the bulldozers are paving the Fugitives’ traditionalist paradise. Inside the poem, as it moves to its end, and with the most erudite and incisive irony, all of the most vexing and painful aspects of the American experience and American poetry gain purchase in the poem and are given not an answer but the clarity of artistic form — the specter of hatred raised, confronted, and left un-indulged.

Natasha Trethewey’s “Pastoral” ends unsettlingly, intentionally so, and leaves its reader in an unsettled state. Good poems and certainly great poems always do just that. They leave us there in the experience of a quandary — the quandary of the poet’s being that has transcended itself into the poem. The specific quandary, the specific quarrel with self, may not be our own, but we come to share its life in the life of the poem through the transformation of mere subject matter into genuine content. To brand something, conversely, is to seek to settle the matter, is to stipulate an orientation that ultimately precludes art’s fullest amplitude. That is because great art refuses labels, brands, even the label “Emily Dickinson,” just by way of example. One must go to the poems, one aftermath of the poet’s life, and become unsettled. That is why in our own milieu there is something restrictive and potentially condescending (depending on the source offering the label) about the branding of poets. The Fugitives identified themselves as much to define what they intended artistically and ethically, but even such self-branding must eventually give way to the poem performed and received in the mind of the reader, the listener. Poetry at its most achieved eludes the brand, even in this late overly commodified moment when poets feel the pressure to be media marketers of their work. The best poems remind us that to be human, to be on serious earth, is to be unequivocally unsettled. They remind us that no univocal label can finally accommodate the fullness and richness of human experience. What is needed, contrarily, is the insight of identity discovered in and through difference — that is the analogical necessity. In an essay happily titled “The Transcendent Poem,” Laura Kasischke quotes Laura (Riding) Jackson on Jackson’s renunciation of poetry. “Corruption of the reason for poetry sets in,” Jackson writes, “when too much emphasis is laid on assisting the reader, when the reader goes to poetry with no notion whatever of the faculties required, the poet is more concerned with stirring up the required faculties than presenting

occasions for exercising them.”^{vi} Whatever comes to be popular in poetry for a time must inevitably find life beyond the brand or settle into some manner of corruption, so Jackson’s reflections imply. And where is our third figure now at the hoopla of commencement, the poet heretic in the baseball cap among the sea of rippling gowns, chevrons loosening, the hood draped behind like an un-spread plumage? Our poet heretic moves, *e pluribus unum*, among the crowd filing out of the arena, in hand a book of poems.

ⁱ Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Harper –Collins, 2015). 356.

ⁱⁱ Elizabeth Alexander, “Introduction” in *The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks* (Washington D.C.: Library of America, 2005) xiii.

ⁱⁱⁱ Shahid Ali, *Poet’s Work, Poet’s Play*, p. 144.

^{iv} Alexander, xiii.

^v Shahid Ali, 134.

^{vi} Laura Kasischke, *Poet’s Work, Poet’s Play*, 57-58.